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Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

FLOYD WALLACE
POUL ANDERSON
AVRAM DAVIDSON
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The Nevada Virus (<i>short novelet</i>)	FLOYD WALLACE	4
A Bit for Mrs. Halloran	JIM HARMON	24
For the Duration	POUL ANDERSON	35
On Hand . . . Offhand: Books	THEODORE STURCEON	49
The Winds of Siros (<i>short novelet</i>)	ROBERT SILVERBERG	52
Executioner No. 43	ROG PHILLIPS	75
Snafu on the New Taos	MACK REYNOLDS	84
Before the Talent Dies	HENRY SLESAR	98
Written in the Stars	ROBERT F. YOUNG	114
Now Let Us Sleep	AVRAM DAVIDSON	119
Venturings	THE EDITOR	130
Cover by Emsch, illustrating "Executioner No. 43"		
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THE NEVADA VIRUS

by F. L. WALLACE

*The Nevada Virus was a disaster. It was also the greatest thing
that ever happened to mankind. I would have shot down the President
if he had ordered my work stopped. . . .*

THE BRIGHT YELLOW MACHINE came in awkwardly even for a helicopter. It bounced on the Los

Angeles-San Bernardino freeway, rose again, and settled heavily to rest a few feet from the barbed wire barricade across the pavement. If I hadn't known otherwise I would have thought the pilot had never flown before.

"The big day's here," said Sergeant Venida brightly.



"I know," I said. "Go over and hold him off for a few minutes. Don't stir the big man up."

"Do you want to hear?" said the sergeant. "I can focus a couple of distance mikes on us."

"I don't want to hear," I growled. "Just check his credentials while I get the pigpen straightened up."

Sergeant Venida departed with what he imagined was a snappy salute. It was anything but snappy but nobody in this army knew the difference. I went to headquarters, pausing at the door. The sergeant had met the opposing force and was actively engaged.

A speck flowing swiftly across the sky caught my attention. I squinted up at it. It was golden. Ours.

How it came to be golden I had never learned. I suppose it was accidental, that it had something to do with the way it was manufactured. But whatever the reason, a golden reflection had become the trademark of our satellites. Not to be outdone, the Soviets had put up satellites that glowed faintly red. The English had had to follow suit and, appropriately enough, theirs were silver. I wondered briefly if satellites had anything to do with the mess we were in.

I hurried into the office and started straightening up. Throwing a cover over an electron microscope, I shoved it into a corner. I could see I wasn't accomplishing much.

Sweeping papers off the desk into the drawers, I called for orderlies who came in and helped. By the time Wayne Adams III got through the sergeant's identification check one office of the quarantine army headquarters was fairly presentable.

Wayne Adams III was one of those bright young men who inherits his father's business. He'd taken over slowly at first. Last year he'd been made chairman of the board of directors. This year he was ready to become president of the concern. There were bigger corporations than Cosmopolitan Life Insurance Company, I suppose, but I couldn't name them.

I pretended to be working when he came in.

"General Lindstrom?"

I laid the papers aside. "Glad to have you with us, Mr. Adams."

He was dressed so conservatively it was almost flashy. He laid his hat on a chair and sat, taking out a paper which he read from. I'd been forewarned of this peculiarity and it scarcely bothered me. "General Theodore Lindstrom, to be exact. Do you mind if I call you Ted?" he said.

"I have no objection."

"You can call me Wayne," he said, scanning the sheet again. "I see you've recently been promoted. It's quite an early age to become a general, isn't it?"

I could have said the same thing of the chairman of the board of Cosmopolitan Life, but I didn't.

"It's just one star," I said. "Besides, the regular army wasn't equipped for this sort of thing. It had to be Biological Warfare or nothing. I guess I was lucky."

He smirked knowingly. "But it isn't warfare, is it?"

"No nation has attacked us, if that's what you mean. But millions of lives are just as surely at stake. The enemy is no less dangerous because we can't see it."

I reached for a report that had taken two days of frenzied writing by a team of doctors and literate technicians—and thirty-six hours of careful editing so that the sense of what they had said was completely concealed. The country would have been better off if Adams III had stayed in his New York office pulling strings and let us fight the disease our own way.

"Here's a digest of the information we've collected. Read it when you have a chance. You may find it interesting."

He waved the report aside. "I'm certain I wouldn't. I know too much about the Nevada Virus."

I put the report on the desk, thinking of the wasted effort. "I wish you'd tell us," I said. "We're pretty much in the dark."

"I don't mean medically."

"Another thing. We don't call it the Nevada Virus," I said. "We don't know where it came from, or even that it's a virus."

"That's the popular name for it."

"It is," I conceded.

"And the first known victim had been in Nevada three days before he became ill and he had been near a grounded satellite and the incubation period is three days, isn't it?"

I was speaking slowly, so I wouldn't say too much. "The period varies. The average is three days."

"In the name of common sense, what else can it be? It's an ordinary virus mutated by a bomb explosion or it was brought down out of space on the surface of a descending satellite."

I was happy to keep talking of non-essentials. "I don't think much of the satellite theory. Meteors are always reaching earth, and nothing like this has ever showed up."

"Surely you acknowledge there's a difference," he said. "Meteors are heated to the point where anything organic is destroyed, on them or inside. Several of the satellites have been parachuted gently to earth."

"The popular belief may be right," I admitted. "We don't know. Anyway, that's not the point. My job is to see that the disease doesn't spread beyond the present limits."

"I want to discuss that," he said. "Are you holding it?"

I had expected this to come up and was prepared. I didn't allow my contempt to show. A third of the population of this country—of the entire world—might die. He wasn't thinking of that. He was

mainly concerned with the insurance policies he might have to pay off.

"Better than we thought we could. It's expanding, but only slightly."

I flicked a switch and a map flashed on the wall. Top-flight executives are particularly impressed with blinking lights and fluorescent arrows that chase themselves in circles. I punched another button and the Los Angeles area glowed.

"It was originally centered in Los Angeles," I said. "It crept slowly north to Ventura. It hasn't yet reached Santa Barbara and we're hoping we can stop it short. South it went much faster. It hit San Diego in a matter of days and the Mexican government closed the border—and meant it. A sparrow doesn't fly to Tijuana."

I snapped the last switch. A green line started inland at the coast above Ventura, bulged east of Los Angeles, included Pomona but left out San Bernadino, angled back to the coast until it hooked around San Diego.

"This is our defense," I said. "Quarantine in depth. If a single case is reported east of the green line we immediately fall back to the next position. Unless and until we have to go over the Rockies the rest of the country is in no real danger."

He glanced casually at the map. "There are two red dots in Nevada."

"Those are apparently spontaneous outbreaks. At any rate they occurred near military bases in isolated communities. They were promptly surrounded and are being taken care of by other units of Biological Warfare."

"They aren't dangerous?"

"Not at all," I said. Except, of course, to the people who lived there.

The phone jangled. I picked it up, listened, started to answer but instead said: "I'll be right out." I hurried to communications, leaving Adams III to look at the map.

"What have you got?" I said. Communications was manned by electronic experts temporarily attached to Biological. They didn't always understand the way we did things.

"I don't know that I should bother you with this," he said. "A man and his wife and kids got out."

"They'll get tired of walking. If they don't turn back they'll die of thirst."

"That's just it. They're not walking. Air patrol spotted them on a side road that wasn't used much even before quarantine. The car's hitting at least seventy-five."

"They seem to be in a hurry," I said. "Will you please tell me how a car got through our blockade?"

"The pilot didn't say, sir, but I've been thinking."

"Thinking isn't for people who don't know how," I said. "Let's have your thoughts."

He screwed his face up. "The quarantine zone's long and most of it is over rugged country. We don't have soldiers every foot of the way. Barbed wire and land mines, of course, but there are random paths through it. A determined man could find an isolated spot, drive his car up, dismantle it, carry the pieces through and assemble it on the other side. Then he'd go back and get his wife and kids and take them through."

"Some people are stubborn," I said. "Tell patrols to converge on the car. Bomb the road ahead. If that doesn't stop him, bomb the car." Ordinary people would turn back at the first sign of trouble—but the man and his wife weren't ordinary or they wouldn't have got this far. I didn't feel good at what had to be done.

The man from communications hesitated. "Sir, the pilot said the couple were quite young."

"If the pilot was that close he should have machine-gunned them on the spot and saved himself the trouble of reporting it," I said. "Tell him to get them and return to his base for disciplinary action."

I left. Before I got back to the office Sergeant Venida stopped me.

"Did I do all right?"

"As well as could be expected. Unfortunately, since you couldn't throw him in the guardhouse you had to let go of him. Now I've got him."

"I tried. I gave him a rough time

when the other man didn't show up but there wasn't much I could do."

"There wasn't much you could do," I said. "Hold on. There *were* supposed to be two. What happened to the other man? A Henry Flummery, or something?"

"Henry Fleming," said the sergeant. "Adams said he had a reason for not bringing Fleming. He said he'd explain it to you."

"He'll have to explain," I said.

"That delayed him a little, my questioning him. But he had an answer and it was reasonable," said the sergeant. "Then I had more fun with him. As usual the identification data from Denver was cobbled."

"Cobbled?" I said, taking a pack from the sergeant's pocket, extracting a cigarette, and dropping the packet in his pocket.

"You know Denver. Communication's not what it ought to be, and anyway they're always getting things fouled up. I let Adams stew until I got it straightened out."

"You did get it right?"

"Absolutely. The picture and prints matched. Kind of blurry but there's no doubt he's the man we were expecting."

"Good work." I lit the cigarette and went back.

"Trouble?" he said as I came in.

"The usual. A family tried to sneak out. We put them back in."

He looked as though he wanted details so I amplified. "I guess they

were tourists, caught here when the quarantine was clamped. Having a rough time of it probably, no work and so on. Thought they could sneak out and head east."

He smiled and it wasn't in commiseration for the family I'd stepped on. It didn't make me fond of him.

"The sergeant tells me Fleming didn't come with you," I said. "Where is he? We received orders to expect two men."

"I'll get to that later," he said. "I notice that none of your men is over thirty. Even on the other end of the flight line, in Denver, everyone is quite young."

"We'll get to it right now," I said. "Mr. Adams, where is Henry Fleming?"

"Henry Fleming is our experimental statistician. He is employed by Cosmopolitan, not the government. I had a perfect right to leave him behind if I wanted. If you didn't get a message that he wasn't coming, take it up with the army."

I stared at him. It was an incongruous face, almost meek, which was quite a contrast with his manner. It flashed through my mind that he had had a bad case of acne as a youth. He used pancake powder heavily.

"Look, Ted, there's no need to be tense about this," he said in an attempt to be winning. "I intend to tell you about Fleming. First tell me this: how old are you?"

I stabbed out the cigarette and

sat down. Even a general had limitations. "Thirty-one," I said.

"That's very young for a general," he said. "But the officer in command of the quarantine would have to be young, wouldn't he?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't allow myself to tell him what I wanted to. Anything else I might say could give him information I'd rather he didn't have.

Adams III seemed quite sure of himself. "Henry Fleming is our experimental statistician, a very good one. Through his work we've been able to extend our coverage to a number of new occupations, atomic research, space stations and the like, with very little risk to the company. But he is forty-seven."

"So he's forty-seven," I said. "Thinking of canning him?"

"Hardly. He's valuable, worth more than he's ever been. But you can see, since he's forty-seven, that I had to drop him off at Denver."

"I don't see why you keep mentioning his age."

"Background material," said Adams III. "You must know that we exchange information with other companies in the field. Fleming put the figures together and came up with some interesting results."

"Results—or opinions?"

"Judge for yourself," said Adams. "Fleming's observation is that the rather spectacular nature of the disease tends to obscure the facts."

I grunted; it was the safest thing to do.

"For instance, in the initial stages the disease attacked all groups, though some ages were far less susceptible than others. Through statistics—and remember some statistics did come past quarantine—Fleming discovered that the disease had stabilized itself. He made a prediction that time has verified."

I leaned back. Sooner or later insurance companies were bound to find out. Thanks to Fleming it was sooner, and there was nothing I could do about it. It wouldn't be long before it trickled down to the general public. I wondered what the effect would be.

"Fleming predicted that the stabilizing age was forty," said Adams. "In the last two months not one person under that age has been stricken with the Nevada Virus."

"We were planning on releasing that information," I said.

"Were you?" said Adams. "I didn't think you were. Well, of those stricken with the Nevada Virus, and no one over forty seems immune—it's only a matter of time until they get it—ninety-six percent died."

"The Nevada Virus, or whatever you call it, is quite lethal," I said.

"It is, but that's not the point and you know it." Adams ran his tongue over his lips. There were pouches under his eyes, as though he hadn't slept much. "It's the four percent who survive that are important."

I wondered what I was going to do with Adams. He was too influential to dispose of in ways that came readily to mind. "You didn't get that out of statistics," I said.

"You'd be surprised what Fleming can do with a few figures," Adams said. "He sat in the crummy office they gave him and worked on it day after day. He had only the information you yourself passed out, but he came up with it."

I pulled open the bottom drawer of the desk and put my foot on it. "What did he come up with?"

Adams leaned forward. His eyes were bright. "The four percent who lived through the Nevada Virus were no longer forty or over." He paused, smiling to himself as he said it: "Whatever age they had been, forty or seventy-eight, they became—seventeen."

I opened the top drawer and took out a gun. Resting my elbow on my knee, I lined up the sights. "That's one piece of information we're not releasing, even to you," I said. "You're under military detention. If you've got any influence with the President, I advise you to use it."

Lines showed on his face as he looked at the gun but he wasn't greatly perturbed. "Don't be absurd. I don't know the President personally but that can soon be remedied. However if you'll just stop and think, this whole threatening business is unnecessary. I'm on your side."

"The Nevada Virus is a disaster," I said. "It's also the greatest thing that ever happened to mankind. I've got orders to see that nobody interferes with our program."

"I'm not interfering. I want the program to succeed."

"We've got to lick it," I said. "First we've got to find what's causing the disease. We don't know what it is, but we'll get there. The next step is to remove the lethal effects. This may take a few years, but we'll do that too. What's left is the most important thing a man can have. Youth—and whenever he wants it."

I was dazzled. For what I saw in the not distant future I didn't need orders to be rough. I would have shot down the President if he had ordered the work stopped.

"That doesn't solve every problem," said Adams. "No one knows how fast people age after becoming youths again. And will the treatment work the second time they age?"

"These are other men's problems. This is mine."

"What happens when age is finally vanquished?" said Adams. "No one dies except accidentally. In one generation we have overpopulation."

"Maybe so," I said. "We've got to take one thing at a time."

"It will have to be used wisely," said Adams. "It can be as deadly as the gun you've got pointed at me."

I took the hint, folding my arms. I still held the gun though and I could turn it on him in less than a second. I made sure he saw that.

"That's better," said Adams, dabbing a handkerchief to his forehead. "These are some of the things that must be faced. I suppose you've thought of them."

"I've thought," I said. "I know there's a way to hold off old age and death, and we'll find it."

"I want it found, but I don't want it misused. That's why I left Fleming behind. He's dangerous."

"Is he?"

"Quite dangerous, I'm afraid. He's dissatisfied."

"So am I. Does that make me dangerous?"

"Yes, but not in the same way. You're burning up with what you haven't got around to doing yet. He's consumed with what he wants to do over."

"That's a big difference," I said.

"It is. Fleming wanted to be a theoretical mathematician. I think he pictured himself as a sort of an Einstein, perhaps specializing in a different field, but that's it essentially. Instead he found himself entangled in practical life and took a job as a statistician. He's very good at this—but he hates it. He's brilliant, but he never has time to develop his theories."

"He's bitter. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, but that's not all. Imagine

Fleming as a youth of seventeen, knowing what he knows now. Give him ten thousand or so he's managed to save against old age, and what is he going to do?"

"What?" I asked.

"He's an extremely competent mathematician. By the time he's twenty he'll run his few thousand to a million. I'm sure he can do it playing the stock market, but there are other ways. By the time he's twenty-five he'll be a dominant figure." Adams stared at me. "He'll be ruthless because he's finally understood he has to be or go under. This time he won't go under."

"You're a dominant figure yourself. So what? I don't think it's necessarily bad," I said.

"I'm not desperate."

"No, you're not."

"You see, he can't be trusted with this information, but I can," said Adams. "You know, I've been formulating a policy for allocating the rejuvenation serum when it's finally perfected."

I coughed. "Will you tell me what that policy is?"

"I'll be glad to. Of course I won't set the policy but my view should be influential."

"It will be."

"Yes. Well, my first thought is that creative minds in all fields and those who are particularly well adjusted should be given priority."

"I agree. In the beginning there'll be shortages, same as with the Salk vaccine."

"Not only in the beginning. Everyone shouldn't be rejuvenated."

"That's a cold-blooded approach."

"Someone's got to be realistic. Would you have us perpetuate vicious criminals or the hopelessly insane?"

"That's a point," I said.

"It is. We have to draw the line somewhere. People will be selected for future society based on how well they fit it in the past. Fortunately we have months and even years to plug all the loopholes."

"Fortunately," I said. I knew who'd be included in his society, and who left out. It was a good thing his weren't the only views that would carry weight. The society he'd set up wasn't my idea of what I wanted to live in.

I wondered—but didn't do anything about what I wondered. I'd listened to him too long. There was a time, and I was close to it, when I could have squeezed the trigger and taken a chance that I could cover somehow. As commander of the quarantine army there was a lot I could cover. There was a remote possibility I couldn't make it seem accidental. In that event, considering who Wayne Adams III was, I'd probably draw a year at hard labor and a dishonorable discharge. It wouldn't be any worse than that, negligence maybe.

I could take that. I was prepared to take it but, how would it look on my record? Would it affect my

chances when I came up for rejuvenation?

"It's a pleasure to talk with someone who understands the situation as well as you do," said Adams. "I'll keep you in mind when the emergency is over. Now, I have a request."

"If it's reasonable."

"It's minor. I want to go into Los Angeles."

"Request denied. We'll try to supply you with any information."

"We have our own information. In some respects it's better than yours. What I want is to talk to those who have survived the Nevada Virus. I want a first-hand impression of the rejuvenees."

"I'll pull one of our doctors out of the UCLA medical center. You can talk to him."

"That would be a waste of my time and his. Have you given the survivors extensive psychological tests?"

"We haven't. At the present we have time to investigate only the medical aspects of their recovery. We're fighting a deadly disease."

"But my company isn't. We want to know what the survivors are like, mentally and physically, what they're ultimately capable of. This is of utmost importance to Cosmopolitan Life and hence ultimately to the country."

I studied him. He was beginning to show the strain. He wanted this badly, and I could think of a few reasons for letting him have it.

"If you go in you face quarantine when you come out," I said.

"Why? I'm immune to the disease."

"We're not sure," I said. "You won't get the disease but you might transmit it to someone else."

"You insist on the quarantine?"

"It's not me. The Commander-in-Chief of the United States gives orders."

"But you interpret the orders to fit the situation."

"I have some leeway," I said.

"So there's no law I can't go into Los Angeles."

"We haven't had that problem," I said.

"I can go in and you can't stop me." Adams was on it now and he wasn't going to let go.

"I can stop you, law or not," I said. "But you can see I don't have to. I wait for you when you come out."

"I'm entirely willing. I'll surrender to quarantine—when I come out."

"Our accommodations aren't the best."

He stared at his fingers, at last looking up with a sharp smile. "I have a solution that will save you the trouble of detaining me, and myself the inconvenience of being out of touch with my business interests."

I grunted skeptically.

"A railroad car, built as tight as a space ship, sealed hermetically. Once I'm inside nothing else comes

in or goes out that doesn't pass through a high temperature heat filter."

"Good idea," I said. "Only thing—there is no such car. Who's going to design and build it?"

"My company will stand the cost. I authorize you to get in touch with them. Tell them to start work at once."

"That doesn't solve everything. It will take a few weeks to build it and deliver it here."

"Time is no problem. Tell them what it's for and it will be ready when I come out of Los Angeles."

"Another thing. My experts pass on the design."

He shrugged. "If you like. As long as I can go back east, I can stand to live in it a month."

"Better make it three months," I said.

"Why so long?"

"It may be more than three months," I said. "We don't know how long it will take to stop the disease."

"Very well, I agree," he said. "Whatever terms you want."

Actually he wasn't much interested in the private railroad car he'd thought up. He was more concerned with getting into the city than what happened when he came out. I could see why, too. He wasn't hard to figure.

He planned on going into the city, getting what he wanted and coming out. Once he was in the car he'd roll away, out of my juris-

diction. A man of his position, when I no longer had him under my thumb, wouldn't find it difficult to pick up doctors who'd say he couldn't possibly transmit the disease—and then he'd be free. That was fine for him—except he didn't count on *my* ideas.

"It's settled," I said. "You go into Los Angeles on your own, subject to the restrictions we've mentioned. By the way, I can't spare a man to follow you around."

"Is there rioting?"

"Some. Nothing extremely violent."

"Then I can take care of myself."

"You hope," I said. "Tomorrow I'll draw up a release. You sign it and I'll find someone to take you in."

He frowned. "Must I wait until tomorrow?"

"If you're in a hurry I'll see what I can do." I flipped open a folder on the desk and leafed through it. "A nurse is going in in twenty minutes. That's all today."

"Get the release and I'll sign it. I'm ready."

"You haven't eaten."

"Food is secondary. I'll eat in Los Angeles."

He wouldn't eat well there but that was his business. I put out a delay order on Miss McKay, the nurse, and improvised a statement that Wayne Adams III had requested entry and that he was being given permission to go into the

disease-ridden city at his own risk. I enumerated all the conditions that were attached to the permission and while it was being typed I suggested he wait at the road.

He was there when Nurse McKay drove up in the truck. She was a small brown-eyed blonde, pert rather than pretty. I had him sign the statement and put him in the truck, making a show of removing some of the drugs and equipment to make room for his suitcase. What was left behind didn't matter really. None of the medicine we'd sent in so far had had any effect on the virus.

"Stay as long as you like," I said to Adams. "When you're done, come back here. No one else is authorized to let you out. Got it?"

"It's clear."

"How you get back is up to you. Walk, buy a car, borrow or steal it. I don't care." I turned to the nurse. "Let him out where he wants, Miss McKay. I'd suggest the hospital but any other place will do. Once he's out of the car, you don't know him. Don't pick him up for any reason on your way back."

I stepped back and gave the signal and the lifter slid under the truck, raising it up and over, placing it on the other side of forty feet of barbed wire, tank traps and land mines which barricaded the road. The truck started for Los Angeles. I waited until it was out of sight and went back to headquarters.

I smoked a cigarette, watching the smoke curl upward. That was boring so I began to read the orders I was supposed to sign. That was boring too so I signed the remainder of the stack without reading them, making the job last. Finally I picked up the statement Adams III had his name on, went over it carefully, had it duplicated and microfilmed and filed away.

After another half hour I switched to the main sentry tower, flipping in an audio before turning on the screen so the soldiers would be alert. They didn't appreciate my forethought but they were wide awake when I looked in.

"Effective now," I said, "shoot all non-military personnel who approach this exit and don't go back on command."

"Yes sir," said the soldier. "Does this apply to the entire perimeter of quarantine?"

"If it did I would have said so. Just this sector."

"Yes sir. Does this countermand the tear gas order?"

"It does. No gas. Shoot them, and make sure they're dead."

I switched off his face. For a while I felt I had accomplished something, but the glow faded. At the end of an hour I felt exactly as I had when talking with Adams III. Uneasy. He was disturbing and I wished I'd never seen him.

I didn't kid myself that his views were representative, but I wasn't so foolish as to believe he wouldn't

find plenty of support. It wasn't pleasant to contemplate so I spent fifteen minutes thinking of nothing else. I wound up glaring across the room at his hat on the chair. He'd forgotten to take it with him.

I went across and scooped it up, pitching it into a closet. Before I got back to the desk I noticed a dark smear on my fingers. The smear wiped off easily. I went back and got the hat out of the closet, handling it carefully. After experimenting, I rubbed the hatband. The stain came from there.

I put the hat on the desk and called for Sergeant Venida. He smelled of beer when he came in and he was chewing gum rapidly in an attempt to cover the smell.

"Sergeant, what was the nature of the difficulty in identifying Adams?"

"Nothing much. I got it straightened up. It actually wasn't Denver's fault. They're having quite a time with all the people scrambling through there trying to get as far as they can from the Nevada Virus."

"Let Denver handle their own problems. Just tell me the difficulty. You said the prints and the picture matched. What didn't?"

"The name," said the sergeant. "That was the only part Denver missed. It was the right army helicopter. I checked the serial number."

"But the name on the picture and prints was Henry Fleming?"

"The name was Fleming, but

that was an easy thing for Denver to get switched. You know how transmission is these days. Anyway, it couldn't be Fleming. He's forty-seven and this guy Adams is twenty-nine. You could see that yourself."

"Somebody got fouled up," I said. "Call what's left of the L. A. police and have them put out an urgent arrest on Henry Fleming. Send that picture to them and say he'll look a few years older and his hair won't be dark when he washes the dye from it. It'll be iron gray."

Venida chewed his gum faster. "Did I goof?"

"I never saw such an expert job of it," I said. "As soon as I figure what to do with you, I'll let you know how badly you goofed."

Actually the sergeant wasn't much more at fault than I was. The wireless photos from Denver weren't good, smudged and blurry. And on top of the trouble Denver was having, there was Fleming himself. His plan was simple and daring. He hadn't tried to resemble Adams. He'd used makeup to make himself seem younger. His brusque and authoritative manner had done the rest. I had thought he was Adams, the captain of high finance.

I stood up. "Get moving. If you're lucky we'll catch Fleming in the next few days and you won't have to see eye to eye with a firing squad. You may even make sergeant again after this is over."

I went to communications and

after some delay got a static-filled band to Denver. Southern California had been cut off in every possible way from the rest of the world. Completely, and that meant all ham radio operators too. To do this we had hastily erected powerful jamming stations around the quarantined area. As a consequence our own beams were none too reliable.

I said little, asking Denver if two men had left their airport in a helicopter. Two men had left. I told Denver what to look for and in a short time they found it.

Of course it was Wayne Adams III who had been dropped off at—or rather near—Denver, and Henry Fleming who had hoisted him over the side. Adams had landed on soft marshy ground and there wasn't a break in his skin—and scarcely a bone in his body that wasn't broken. They scooped him up and sent him east for burial but I wasn't at headquarters when this was reported.

I was in a two-truck convoy of medical supplies headed for Los Angeles. The people in the quarantined area were something less than enthusiastic over the soldiers that kept them in but so far they had never interfered with shipments of drugs and antibiotics.

Two miles from the barbed wire we found the nurse. She was lying on a hillside above the road, quite conspicuous to anyone who might come by, but no one had come by. Once it had been a busy highway

but these days it was used only by the army. People had learned they couldn't get out.

We stopped the truck, and soldiers stood guard with carbines as two of us climbed the bank. The nurse was alive and, when her hands and feet were untied and the tape pulled off her mouth, vocal. "God, the ants," she said, brushing herself vigorously if indelicately. She began telling the story at once. I stopped her when she mentioned the gun.

"What kind of a gun was it?"

"I didn't notice. I thought he was reaching for cigarettes and the next thing I knew I was looking into it. He told me to stop and I did. Then he had me walk up here and he tied me up."

"Is that all?"

"That's all. He got in the truck and drove away. I don't understand why he did this."

"He's forty-seven."

"That's a reason?"

"He thinks so."

"He didn't look forty-seven," she said. "Yes, I guess he did, close up when he began sweating." She frowned bewilderedly. "He broke into Los Angeles."

"Yes, and everyone wants to get out. He's the exception."

"He's crazy," she said.

"I can't say he is. I understand some of his reasons. I don't agree, but I understand. The odds are twenty-to-one against him, but he thinks it's worth a try."

We went down to the truck. Before we started I asked if she'd told me everything he'd said. She remembered one thing she'd left out. He'd asked her where she was supposed to deliver the truck and had questioned her closely on the route. I got behind the wheel myself and made good time to the UCLA medical center.

The truck he'd taken from the nurse was there but Henry Fleming wasn't. He'd arrived a few hours earlier, parked the truck and asked to help. There was always more than the staff could do so they had assigned him to carrying in patients. For half an hour he'd worked at this, giving patients water, wiping their lips, lighting cigarettes. Then he had wandered back into the hospital. No one had seen him leave but he wasn't there now.

I left the nurse at the hospital and took my convoy to see the acting chief of police. He was thirty-five, and nervous about his age. The veterans of the force were dead or dying and the police were on the verge of demoralization as well as being overworked. The acting chief had never expected to reach such a position before the virus had hit and he still wasn't used to it.

I jolted him out of his shakes by threatening to send in soldiers to run the city. I didn't have the men to spare and he knew it but it made him feel better to think that somewhere there were men he could draw on if absolutely necessary.

He promised me Fleming in twenty-four hours. At least he was thinking like a cop.

I went back to headquarters. The sentries didn't fire, though it was after dark when we arrived and we were quite close before they could see who we were. I ripped them all down one grade on the spot, except one officer who couldn't go any lower and still hold a commission. I sent him into the city on hospital duty.

Two days passed without sign of Fleming. Washington was by no means happy that he'd killed Adams and they told me this strongly. They also alerted Army Intelligence, which investigated Fleming from the eastern end. He was married, had a modest but comfortable home nearly paid for, a grown, married son and a daughter in her last year of college. The week before he left New York he'd drawn twelve thousand from an account that totaled somewhat less than nineteen thousand. Attached to the bank book Intelligence found in his desk was a note from Fleming to his wife advising her she would have to go to work if he didn't come back in a few months. The army asked for my comment on this. I said Fleming's wife ought to look for a job.

The morning of the third day I called in Nurse McKay from the medical center and gave her an ambulance, a driver, and two guards. In the ambulance I mounted

a machine gun and installed a tank of napalm. Her instructions were to visit every hospital in the city and surrounding communities. Once a day was preferable but if she couldn't make that schedule then at least every other day. She had talked to him and should recognize his voice. Now that the three days incubation period had passed, his voice might be all that was recognizable.

She batted her startling brown eyes at me and said she'd know who he was if she heard him again. I patted her where it would do the most good and promised her a week's leave at Lake Arrowhead when this was over. She gave me another soulful look that was by no means merely in answer to the promise of a leave. I made up my mind at once that I too could find some way to get to Arrowhead for a few days when she went.

But she didn't find Fleming.

That fell to Sergeant Venida, who'd lived most of his life in Los Angeles. He asked permission to go in civvies. This wasn't dangerous, unless he met someone who knew him and would ask what he was doing out of the army. Soldiers, in or out of uniform, weren't popular in Southern California.

I discussed his plans with him. He didn't have any. He said he wanted to go in and look around; he might find something. It wasn't good but I couldn't offer anything better. I let him go in.

At the end of a week I got his message, indirectly, as we'd arranged. He called a hospital and they got in touch with me, which they could do since they had a line to headquarters. I had intended to have a late lunch but I skipped it when I got his word. In very little time three medical supply trucks were headed for Los Angeles. The trucks were loaded but we weren't carrying antibiotics.

I picked up Sergeant Venida on Western Avenue. I asked him if he was sure it was Fleming and he said it was. I told him to give the driver directions and we went south. A few minutes later we stopped.

"It's down the street," he said. "There's an alley in back. We'd better block it."

"What about the front?"

"One truck can handle the front. The alley's the main entrance these days."

I assigned a truck to the front. They were to park there, nothing else, unless someone came out. We wanted everyone who came out.

The other truck circled the block and entered the alley from the opposite end. We met in the center. The sergeant and I got out and I instructed the soldiers. It was an alley in a dingy commercial district and it had never been clean but since the virus had hit sanitation hadn't been improved at all. The sergeant led the way to a flimsy door, put his shoulder against it and eased in.

The door closed behind us and we were in a dimly lit hall facing another door. The odor was something I'd remember. I couldn't identify it but it was somewhere between a barnyard and a hospital. The sergeant leaned against the next door but it wouldn't open. He cupped his hands to the crack and yelled: "Customer."

"No room," came the muffled reply.

The sergeant pounded on the door. "This is Venida. I talked to you this morning."

Footsteps shuffled near and a voice on the other side whispered: "Quiet. Come back tonight. There'll be room."

The door opened slowly a few inches. I reached my hand in and grabbed the first thing I felt. It was an ear. I pulled him closer and shifted my grip to his hair, kicking the door open. I had hold of a squat ugly man. There were half a dozen cages of cats, and on the other side of the room was an aviary in which parakeets fluttered and screeched. The man was screaming and the cats joined in and somewhere two dogs began to bark.

"God," I said. "A pet shop."

"I'm a veterinarian," said the man. "Got a sick dog? Bring him in. I'll fix him up or you don't pay."

"What we want's upstairs," said Venida.

The man got a good glimpse of my uniform, broke away and started to run. I reached out and quickly

put my hand over his mouth. I half carried, half dragged him upstairs.

The smell was worse there, a few mangy animals whose cages were never cleaned and were apparently rarely fed—and the odor of men and women. I looked down at the man. He was beginning to suffocate. It would be no loss if he did but I took my hand off his face.

"I run a good place," he gasped as soon as he had breath. "Five out of the last hundred lived on me. That's better than your hospitals."

"If you're not lying, you're lucky," I said. "Averages worked out for you, that's all." I shook him. "I'm going to turn you loose and I hope you try to run away. I want you to run."

The self-appointed doctor disappeared almost at once. I looked at the filth. I could understand why Fleming came here but not the others. Of course in this situation quacks flourished and the vet-doctor seemed to have convinced quite a few people he had something our hospitals didn't.

The sergeant nudged my elbow. "Over here. You can tell by his shoes."

We went along rows of patients. They were lying on cages, most of which were empty; some were curled up in the larger cages; others sprawled on the floor. There was a rusty sink in one corner. Two tin cans and a chipped plastic cup hung on nails beside the sink.

"He got the bridal suite," said Venida. "I figure he paid a thousand for it. Maybe two thousand."

The man who might be Fleming was lying on two large boxes of approximately the same height. The mattress was a combination of folded cardboard and newspapers. He was covered by sacks that had been ripped open and spread over him.

His face was moldy. All the patients were moldy. It was common bread mold, the spores of which were everywhere in the air. Mold didn't have anything to do with the disease directly. As far as we knew mold didn't help or hinder the disease, but in a body weakened by the Nevada Virus it grew more rapidly than it did on bread.

This didn't kill the patient, nor cure him, but it was irritating. In our hospitals, mold was kept down by washing the patient with chemical inhibitors. One small patch was always allowed to remain, usually on the arm. This was the test. If the mold began to turn yellow and wither the patient was over the worst; he was going to live. It didn't turn yellow often.

I stared down, wondering whether this was Fleming. He wasn't so stupid as to keep identification on him and unless he lived we couldn't tell who it was. This was the peculiarity of the disease. It virtually encased the body in a hard crusty shell of sores. Researchers were comparing what went on in the

soft formless flesh inside with the development of an embryo. There wasn't much to the comparison except that once in a while a young man did shoulder his way out of the old.

"Damn it," I growled. "Let's have some light."

The vet, who had crept back upstairs after seeing the soldiers who surrounded the place, turned on a bulb. The faint glow it shed didn't help much but I could see one thing: the mold on the man Venida said was Fleming wasn't withering. It was blackening, beginning to ripen. If I was going to get an answer it had to be soon.

"Fleming," I shouted. "We've got you."

I kept shouting his name, hoping he'd respond. He stirred, but that was all. He flung off the sack and felt his face. He was furry with mold. It was growing through his shirt.

I pried fungus out of his ear; it might help him hear. I shouted his name again and he muttered. I knelt to hear. "I lost," he whispered.

"You lost, Fleming," I said, but this was not proof it was he. Anyone would say he had lost in such a circumstance.

I broke a match in the middle, bending it and shoving it in to keep his ear open. "I don't know where you got the idea of how this is going to be given out," I said, close to his face. "Maybe what you said was Adams' idea, maybe it

wasn't. You could have made it up to impress me with what a real louse is like. One thing's sure: no one person will control who's allowed to become young again. You should have waited. Everybody will have a chance at this."

His lips moved. "You're young," he said. "You believe everything they tell you."

I stood up. I'd got the right man and I was the hero but I wasn't as happy as I thought I'd be.

"Tough it turned out this way," I said.

His hand groped over his face, feeling the sores that formed the shell over his body. He was completely covered with sores beneath the fungus. He touched his eyelids and with cracked fingers ripped off one scab that kept him from seeing, and then the other. His eyes blinked up at me, for an instant sparkling. "I tried but I lost," he said. "I had to do it. It was the chance of a lifetime."

NOTE . . .

If you enjoy VENTURE SF, you will enjoy some of the other Mercury Publications. **FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION**—*The all-new August issue, now on sale, features Robert Heinlein's charming, "The Menace from Earth." Also, a hard-hitting short novel by Walter M. Miller, Jr., and tales by Mildred Clingerman and others.*

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE—*Hugh Pentecost's gripping novelet, "An End to Fear," leads off this fine August issue. Also stories by Thomas Kyd, John Collier, Rufus King, William Holder and others.*

MERCURY MYSTERY BOOK-MAGAZINE—*Jay Albert's featured, original novel, "Five Hours to Live," is accompanied by a taut William C. Gault story, and pieces by Erle Stanley Gardner and others.*

BESTSELLER MYSTERY—"The Black Angel," by Cornell Woolrich. Abridged. "Packed with action and burling with emotion," says The Saturday Review.

JONATHAN PRESS MYSTERY—"The Basle Express," by Manning Coles. Abridged. "Fast-paced and funny," says the San Francisco News.

Blood oozed out of the sores he'd torn the scabs from, forming puddles on his eyes. Youth to him was worth dying for.

I wondered what it meant to me. It was always myself I'd been fighting for and nobody else mattered. In the beginning it had seemed simple. We'd find a cure, of that I'd been certain. We'd use the miraculous side effects of the disease, and everybody would benefit. I would benefit. Simple, and dazzling.

I thought of a young family machine-gunned, of Adams III lying boneless in the mud, of a trigger I wouldn't have dared pull because of the future. Fleming's mouth was out of sight, but I could see the bastard smiling at me.

I nudged him with my foot. "Take it with us," I said to the sergeant. "It's no proof, but Washington will want to look."

Going down the stairs I scratched my head. My hair felt like a thick growth of fungus.

A BIT FOR MRS. HALLORAN

by JIM HARMON

*You couldn't tell one Martian
from another, Mrs. Halloran. . . .
But their horses! God's truth, Mrs. Halloran,
their horses were another story. . . .*

YES, MRS. HALLORAN, I CAN TELL you one reason a man shouldn't love horses.

How much do you know about them? Owner and fancier? Very well, that gives you quite a bit of knowledge about horses, which is more than I have.

No, I wouldn't say it was just a prejudice on my part. I have a logical reason for not wanting to go to your horse show.

I could make an exception and go with you to a Western movie, where I *might* be able to agree with you objectively about equine beauty. I could admire Currier and Ives prints or paintings by Remington and value the symmetry of the animal. But I would never—damnably well never—go with you to a horse show.

Nothing personal, you understand.

Yes of course, it's only right that I explain, Mrs. Halloran.

It's nice to walk in this bar and

have a drink when I really want to and I was glad to see you come in too. But you are asking for this.

I'm going to tell you the whole story of the vacation Elizabeth and I took on Mars a few years ago.

Yes, I said Mars. You hadn't thought about Mars, had you?

It was like staring at a demanding sheet of stationery until you went snow blind.

"There just isn't anything to see," I said, frowning, blinking my eyes and looking out once again, hopefully, across the off-white desert tracked with the sweep of our tire trail.

"I like it." Elizabeth sat steering our runabout effortlessly. At the—inn?—she had grabbed the half-circle of the steering wheel. Her hands were competent. Perspiration illuminated the clean lines of her face. Above her mouth, the salty beads collected quickly, accentuating her sensuous pink lips.

"It's picturesque," she said, looking determinedly for something to point out to me, at the same time tracing the biting line of a bra strap under her terrycloth shirt. "It's lovely. Better than South America."

"Sure," I drawled. I lifted myself from the seat where it was getting hot and sticky, and hitched my knickers down to cross my legs. "Best vacation we ever had," I grumbled.

(We always tried to go somewhere different every year. We ran into you, Mrs. Halloran, several times—London, Rome, mostly on the continent, wasn't it? Elizabeth and I took in a lot of other places—Rio, the Islands, Africa. I think that was my favorite. You should go to Kenya State Park and watch the animals. No cages. You can ride around in Fords and see them right on the game trails and in their lairs. We had to stop once and let a pride of lions cross the road. No, it isn't completely out of a Professor of Ethnology's line; seeing how the beasts lived showed me a lot about how the natives *had* to live. . . . On Mars there didn't seem to be anything to see or learn no matter how far you drove.)

"Want me to take the wheel?" I said, wearily. "You must be tired."

"Not a bit," Elizabeth assured me.

"You sure?"

Elizabeth shook her head. I thought that was rather odd. She was a pretty lazy girl, which I had

thought was cute and sexy the first time I met her, and she had never been too sloppy about it since so I had never been completely disillusioned.

"The air on Mars must have vitamins in it," I suggested.

She smiled and expanded her lungs. "Lots. I feel like I could lick the world. And Mars, too!"

"Just let me know if you suddenly feel like pickles and ice cream, honey," I muttered.

There was something out on the desert. I blinked my eyes to make sure. I had been staring so hard at the white sands I could see the germs floating across my retina clearly. But this was no germ.

They were horses.

I put my arm around Elizabeth and pointed them out to her. "Just like in a field back in Ohio or Illinois, baby. A black one and a brown one."

"Sorrel."

I had been looking at the bright sunlight on the desert too long. A wave of vertigo flowed over me and passed. I found myself thinking about what had happened to the horses we had seen at a bullfight in Madrid and my lips were curled back over my teeth in a wide, wide smile. I wanted that to happen to these horses.

I rubbed my hand over my eyes briskly. That was silly. It had made me sick at the time and it would take more than latent sadism to make me want to see it again. It

would require a secret masochism.

For no obvious reason, I suddenly thought of something. "Elizabeth, this is our *first* vacation on Mars, isn't it?"

She smiled briefly. "You know it is, Doug."

"Sure," I said. "Sure, only where did we go last year, Mrs. Marley?"

Elizabeth stretched her neck and looked out of the bottoms of her eyes. "Station up ahead. I think we need a fresh charge."

I looked around. I hadn't seen the station before. It was squat and ugly, blazing red.

"These electric cars are damn inefficient," I told her. "Give me a Model A any day. There's a real classic. People will be driving them fifty years from now."

Elizabeth slid the runabout in neatly between the totem spirals.

"Not on Mars," she said.

The attendant stirred himself out of the deep shadows of the roof's overhang.

"I don't know," I grunted. "If they could get them here, they would be a lot better than these mobile sardine cans. There must be transportation technicalities—Damn, I'm taking the ancestor of all headaches. Any aspirin in the glove compartment?"

She glanced at me with a flick of her gold eyes.

"No glove compartment," Elizabeth said, half in humor, half gently.

I cursed under my breath and watched the attendant fasten our car's cable to the induction coil. He was dressed in clean coveralls, his face oddly flat and expressionless. Like all of them, he was a complete nonentity.

I shook my head. "All of these Martians look alike to me. Exactly alike. I don't see how anyone could tell them apart."

Elizabeth ran her carmine-tipped fingers through her hair. It fell into its natural waves instantly, as usual.

"I don't even try telling one from the other."

I boosted her out of the driver's seat unceremoniously.

"Neither do I," I admitted.

She waited to answer that until I scooted under the steering wheel and got out on her side, away from the attendant, and said "That isn't like—like you."

I groped for the cobalt sky with cramped arms and stuck that way. It sure as an early Christian Hell *wasn't* like me. I was interested in *all* peoples. Why shouldn't I be interested in the Martian race? Here I had a gold-plated opportunity to study them close at hand and I was ignoring it. It would be a valuable pioneer work. Or at least I was sure the subject hadn't been exhausted. In any case, personal reports are always of some value.

Without realizing it, I had moved away from the silent attendant.

I don't fear or hate people I don't understand—only people I don't *want* to understand.

"Want to stretch your legs?" I asked my wife.

She told me no.

It had been a long drive but I realized that there wasn't anything more I wanted at the station either.

"Let's go back to the inn and have dinner," I suggested.

I didn't pay the attendant—this like the rest of it had been taken care of. I helped Elizabeth in and took the wheel myself.

"I *like* this car," she offered after we had left the station half a mile behind. "Maybe we could take it back with us."

The horses were off to the side of our route across the trackless sand again.

"You like this whole vacation, don't you?" I said, knowing the answer as I thought of the question.

Horses up ahead.

"Yes," she whispered. "I can relax. Think. This time there isn't the constant worry about having to go back to the old grind. The same old grind, Doug. I'm sick as hell of that old grind, Doug."

Then—the horses.

After it was over and I was rocking back and forth behind the steering column half-suffocated, gasping for air, holding myself in my seat with hands slippery with moist fear on the wheel, I couldn't believe I had really done it.

It was so blasted *silly*.

I had tried to run down one of the horses with the car.

"Darling, darling," Elizabeth was crooning, I became aware. "Is it your heart? Your heart?"

That always made me blind mad. Years before, I had had a little trouble and ever since whenever I caught my breath sharply Elizabeth asked about my heart. It made me feel so *weak*. And I wasn't.

Sometimes when I was feeling mean I used to tell Elizabeth she wasn't always so considerate of my heart at night.

This time I stroked her hair. "I just dozed off at the wheel," I lied. "Psychosomatic relief for the headache, maybe. Startled myself when I jerked up awake." I looked around over the desert. It was absolutely barren.

"I didn't hit the horse," I stated.

"No," Elizabeth said.

I was sorry, with a sorrow deep as death, dark as ecstasy. . . .

Elizabeth gasped and I leaned forward in the seat. I looked at my watch and cursed silently. It said five-thirty. We were hungry.

"Let's get back to the inn for dinner," I said.

"Yes." Elizabeth nodded quickly.

We were very hungry.

I drove fast.

We always got hungry at five-thirty.

Elizabeth was at the white-clothed table when I entered the

empty dining room. I had changed my clothes to be formal, not out of necessity. They weren't dirty. Not after traveling around all day. Mars was sanitary.

"Have you ordered?" I asked as I reached the table.

Elizabeth nodded shortly. "For both of us." She smiled.

I sat down, produced a cigaret and sucked it alight. "You're getting pretty aggressive these days," I said.

"Damn. I ordered dinner. Don't tell me that wounds your masculine vanity?"

I made a smile for her inside the smoke. "You drove the car today. You grabbed the wheel and drove."

The waiter brought the tray. He had on a spotless white jacket and an empty expression. I couldn't tell him apart from the station attendant.

Elizabeth glanced at the waiter and adjusted the shoulder strap of her black sheath of an evening dress. She adjusted it down. The valley between blue-traced ivory curves showed pink.

The waiter finished the table setting and went away.

Elizabeth did not look after him. "I felt like driving," she informed me.

"You never felt much like doing anything back on Earth," I observed.

She shrugged and rested her chin on her palm. "That was back there. Things are different here."

I nodded. "They are," I said.

"You sound awfully grim about that."

(I had a lot of reasons to be grim. For one thing, my wife was sitting across the table from me looking beautiful and desirable and I couldn't do a thing about it on Mars, not a thing. I hope I'm not shocking you, Mrs. Halloran. On the other hand, why be hypocritical about it? I don't give a continental corps of drum boys if I am shocking you. Don't just giggle. Have another drink.)

"*You know more about this than I do,*" I said to Elizabeth without wanting to say it.

Her eyelids didn't flutter. "About *what*, Doug? I didn't think you thought I knew more about anything than you."

I made my hands steady and uncovered the dishes. I served Elizabeth and myself. I started to take a bite, then decided against it. The hunger inside me raised to another plateau and I ate.

"Elizabeth, don't make me think you are against me too." I was begging her, chewing my food carefully and begging her.

Her fine hands were dissecting the steak with silver. They paused. She looked up. "Against you? Too?"

I couldn't look her in the eyes. It suddenly seemed foolish.

"It probably is just some—*xenophobia*. Fear of the alien. But I get feelings of persecution. As if everybody were in some giant conspiracy against me."

"Doug," she said. It started out as a joke but there was sympathy in it.

"And I can't remember things," I said, having to finish it now that I had started.

"Absent-mindedness is standard equipment for professors," she said, laughing gently. "I forget where I put things, darling. We all do."

The back of my neck seemed to need rubbing with my hand. "It's more than that. How did we get here? To Mars? *Mars*."

"By spaceship, of course," she said.

"Of course. How else could you get to Mars? But Elizabeth," I said, "I don't remember being on a spaceship. In fact I don't remember that there *are* any spaceships. The last I can remember, spaceships were only in magazines and comic strips."

Elizabeth looked worried. "Doug, I don't know about this. I don't know how often these kind of lapses occur. You had better see a good doctor when we get back."

I drained my water glass and refilled it from the pitcher. "Yes," I grunted.

"We shouldn't have come to Mars in the off season." She ran her fingers through her thick hair in agitation. "It is sort of lonely. It would be better with more people around."

"Yes," I said again.

Elizabeth dropped her spoon into her half-empty dessert.

"Let's go up to our room," she said to me.

What for? I thought. I walked around the table and held her chair. "Elizabeth, we go upstairs every night. We drive through the day, eat in the evening and go to bed at night. Let's do it different tonight. Let's get out the runabout and see what Mars looks like by twin moonlight."

Elizabeth looked at me. "No." She added something: "It's too cold." She tried again: "I don't feel like it tonight, Doug."

I nodded. She was right.

But tomorrow we will do something different, I decided.

We went upstairs.

The world itself was different the next morning.

Something was changing.

We stood before our runabout and shivered in the difference of sensation. It was not really a difference in temperature, of hot and cold. Still I had put on a tweed jacket and Elizabeth had slipped into her pony-skin coat.

I looked at Elizabeth's profile, too sharp against the white sunlight. "I don't want to go out today," I said.

Elizabeth smiled fleetingly, eyes fast to the blank horizon. "I'd like to," she whispered. "It will do us—good, Doug."

I stood there quietly and once and for all, finally, at last, had the guts to reject pretense. "I don't want

to, but we'll go," I told her. "*We have to.*"

She didn't say anything more. We got into the car and I took the wheel. I drove and because the mind is so kind to itself, because it protects itself so well, I didn't think for a long time.

Today was different.

The difference invaded my peace irrevocably. Before, there had been nothing to see on the desert. But today I had the intense impression that there was something to see if only I was fast enough. If only I could turn my head fast enough to catch what lurked at the furthest, blurred edge of the tunnel of my vision I would see something significant.

Whatever it was, it was just beyond the nearest rise of sand, or perhaps just behind the bottom rim of the bowl of the sky.

Then it seemed much closer. It seemed to be in the car with Elizabeth, with me.

My scalp tingled delicately and hair crept on the top of my head and stiffened at the base of my neck. I turned my eyes slowly towards Elizabeth but I looked back before my gaze reached her.

I tried again to look at her, and again, and finally I turned my eyes and my head and I looked at her.

And I saw her coat.

I wanted to scream but some civilized part of my mind made me ashamed to scream in front of my

wife, so I just screamed inside. It isn't good that way. It's better to scream outside yourself.

I stopped the car and very gently I took hold of Elizabeth's coat and started to pull it off her. She looked at me once as if to protest but something stopped her.

I smiled at her reassuringly and I saw her white teeth clamp down on her full, pink lower lip. I made myself stop smiling.

The sand gritted under my shoes as I walked away from the car, carrying the coat.

There was no graduation between the metronome of normalcy and the trip-hammer of agony.

I was breathing all right one second and the next I was on my knees dying of suffocation.

I waited impatiently for the air-starvation to end as it had the day before in the car, but it held on, continued evenly. I felt, sand biting cheek, and it got worse.

Dimly, without thinking, only by instinct and even it was blurring, I scrambled around and crawled back towards Elizabeth and the car, dragging the coat behind me.

She was in the seat waiting for me.

"Why didn't you come?" I croaked at her.

She didn't say a word. I think she wondered about it, but she didn't say a word.

I lurched to my feet and started to get back into the car. I stopped. I held the coat out at arm's length.

I laughed, and I squeezed the coat up against my chest. Why had I ever wanted to get rid of the coat? It was dead. Killed by man. The hide had been shaped by man to his own uses. It was nothing.

Except, perhaps, a pony-skin symbol.

I rested my spine against the edge of the car door and looked out across the desert.

My hands were abruptly patting down my pockets and I wondered what I was looking for. I found it. It was an accordion-fold unit of postcards—the inn supplied them free to guests. I had scribbled a few lines to Elizabeth's mother politely in the tiny message box that bravely invaded the domain of those who liked to look at pictures. I had done it sometime—days?—before. Now I would use it.

I walked back towards the place where my tracks stopped and blurred back, holding my breath the last few feet. Just before the imprint of my steps began to waver, I halted and struck a match to the shiny paper of the folder. It flared orange and I threw it past the furthest mark I had made in the Martian sand.

The fire turned to a deep, deep laboring red and died.

I returned to the car and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth sat across from me on the other side of the polished and gleaming table top. She had on a

different gown than the night before, blue with a faint gunmetal figure. I still wore my tweds of the morning. They were spotless and unsweated.

I watched the waiter carefully as he brought the food. I saw him and I saw Elizabeth's coquettish attitude towards him. Most of all, I saw that he had no nose.

After he had gone, I said, "They give us our air, Elizabeth."

She lifted her handsome shoulders. "What of that?"

I reached over the table and took her wrist.

"Don't you see?" I asked her. "They could cut it off anytime they liked. *They do*—when we do something they don't like."

Her light brown eyes darted.

"When you do something they don't like?" she said fiercely.

I ignored that. "Elizabeth, we have to take the next rocket back to Earth. I tell you it isn't safe among these people . . . or whatever they are."

She looked at me for a lingering second. "*You fool*," she said. Her pulse was hammering under my fingertips. She jerked her wrist away.

Her breathing became shallower. "Why do you want to go back, Doug? To make money? To earn a living? Do you know how *disgusting* and degrading that is to me? Making a living is *dirty*. I hate it."

"Maybe that's why you married me," I said, without wanting to.

"Don't be so smug," Elizabeth said evenly. "I do as much to earn your salary as you do, darling. You would be eaten alive by campus politicians if it weren't for me."

"That's a lie," I said because I knew it was true.

I thought perhaps I saw a slight tic in her right cheek but I may have been wrong. She looked down and continued eating. I did too. The hunger we got at five-thirty was too strong to ignore.

"I want to go home because," I said carefully, "I *can't* love you here. They don't want me to."

"You should see some type of doctor, Doug."

I made myself stop eating. I didn't ask her what type. "You like things just the way they are?"

Elizabeth continued eating.

"Don't you—care for me at all?" I asked, a character in a Victorian drama.

She looked up finally. "I love you, you idiot." She sounded tired. Tired. "But it's so *tranquil* this way. It isn't like the pointless, circular rat-race on Earth. There's time for contemplation, time to think, make decisions . . ."

I got up from the table.

"What are you going to do with all your decisions?" I asked her. "Check them at the gate along with my—"

I headed upstairs. It was time to sleep. In the morning, Elizabeth and I would go for another sight-seeing tour. In the evening, we

would have dinner in the big, empty dining room once more.

It was a great life, but I was weakening.

Our air extended for a radius of thirty feet from the runabout, as nearly as I had been able to judge from my experiment. The paper wouldn't burn beyond that point. There wasn't enough oxygen to support combustion.

Martians didn't breathe, I decided. I had finally seen why the faces of the station attendant and the waiter and the others looked so flat and expressionless. They didn't have noses. Those were the facts I had to work on. I worked on them until I had a plan. My plan was primitive but I had a sound background in primitive traditions.

I drove across the desert and Elizabeth sat beside me, saying nothing.

The Change, the Difference, that was about us had not progressed. It was the same. The Difference was becoming familiar. Somehow that made it worse.

After a time, with power failing, I steered into a bright red station. I couldn't tell them apart. Maybe it was the same one. Maybe there was only one. If so, it was always just where we needed it.

The attendant shuffled out and attached our power cable to one of the spirals, flipping an external twist of metal on the column. He looked exactly like the waiter.

He bent down and inspected our wheels.

It was when he was examining the right front wheel and Elizabeth had gotten out and was quietly staring at the featureless landscape that I took from beneath my jacket the chair arm I had broken off and burned to a point.

I stepped out of the car in one movement and got the shaft of the arm under his chin. I reached around him and touched the stake to his heart. He was close to me but he had no odor except one of oil and sand.

"Send us back home, to our world," I told him, laughing.

His body spasmed against me.

"No, Doug, no," Elizabeth cried. "They gave us the world—their world—don't make them take it away from us."

I stopped laughing. It sounded pretty bad, uncomfortably over the line. "Baby, do you think they have given us Cloudeuckooland? Utopia?" I said loudly. "All they gave us is the works. We're in their zoo."

"But—we're—free," she said.

"Free? Free to get violently hungry at five-thirty? Free of having to worry about increasing our numbers? That's their worry. They will replace their specimens as needed. In the meantime they don't want to strain their facilities."

Elizabeth turned, mouth opening, soft eyes on the runabout.

"We had movement, not free-

dom," I told her fast, keeping my grip on the attendant. "Remember Kenya State Park? The Martians refined it. They give the animals the cars and let them drive around showing themselves off. Maybe that's how the lions in Kenya feel."

The attendant began squirming spiritedly. I took a deep breath and held it. I wondered why they hadn't cut off the oxygen before this. I pressed the point of my stake deeper. "Sendushome," I rasped.

The attendant began moving. I couldn't stop him. He dragged me along.

He checked the cable connection with the spiral and flipped the outside twist of metal. He turned. He checked the cable connection with the spiral . . .

I hit him on the shoulder with my stake. He flipped the outside twist of metal, disconnected the cable, and stowed it back in our runabout. He shuffled back inside the station.

I turned to Elizabeth. She was staring, chewing on the back of her hand, sobbing inside her throat.

"We don't have to worry about him," I said. "He just works here."

The horses trotted up and looked at us.

I dropped my eyes to the foolish stake gripped in my hand. I was a rube who had mistaken the trained monkey in the cage outside the gates for the zookeeper.

I looked at Elizabeth. She had sensed all along that the waiter and

the attendant, if there were more than one, were in no remote way human. That was why, perhaps without thinking, she had tried so hard to get a normal, masculine response out of them.

The horses or what looked like horses were still observing me.

They didn't look like intelligent creatures . . . but did I, with my charred stake?

Elizabeth and I were trapped in the zoo, all reason said. So naturally I discarded reason as useless, and charged the beasts with my weapon and an enraged bellow.

A sharper sound cut across my yell as, dispassionately and with a startling new-found facility, I lined up the thrust of my sharp instrument with the heavy chest muscles of a big bay. I was choked with air starvation but I didn't care.

The sound was a whinny of terror . . . and I got a message, somewhere in here. It was not a compliment. Even after I got it, I held on to my stake, and that clinched it.

I took Elizabeth's limp, almost dead hand and led her back to the runabout. She didn't drive. I didn't either. It headed back toward the Inn.

"They are sending us home," I said.

Even after centuries of dealing with Earthmen, the Martians were not able to cope with beings who, even deprived of the common processes of life and therefore dead

unless they stopped resisting, continued to resist. Their horror and fear and disgust demanded that they rid themselves of at least these particular specimens of the species.

"We're going home," I repeated for my wife.

"How?" Elizabeth asked, almost as if she were interested.

"The same way we came," I said. "The same way that nobleman in the Charles Fort book you used to like so well came."

Elizabeth finally presented me with her gaze.

"We will walk around the horses," I told her.

So have another drink, Mrs. Halloran. To tell you the God's truth, I don't usually drink like this, but when I drink like this, Mrs. Halloran, I tell you the God's truth. And *that*, Mrs. Halloran, is that I wasn't glad to see you at all like I said I was. Horse wipes off on people like you. You look like horse. You smell like horse. When you came prancing and whinnying in here and reared up and put your fetlocks on the bar here, Mrs. Halloran, frankly, you gave me the heaves. I didn't want to tell you that story. I wanted to forget that story.

But anyway, have another drink. . . . Eddie! Fill us up.

Oh . . . she did, huh? Oh.

Well, give me one then, and one for yourself, Eddie, and hooray for Henry Ford.



FOR THE DURATION

by POUL ANDERSON

*You could trace the progress of our army
by the sere grass and autumn leaves in midsummer.*

*Curious that we, in the springtime of our hope,
should bring with us this winter blast. . . .*

THERE WERE FOUR OF THEM. ANY one of them could have broken my back in his hands, but the Ns usually worked in teams of four, and came about four in the morning. That way, they were less hampered by crowds. People by day would

gather to watch an N kicking in somebody's ribs, and get in the way, but during the empty darkness before sunrise the noise of boots only made them thank Hare that they weren't receiving such guests.

As a professor at the University,

I rated a single room all to my own family. After the boys grew up and Sarah died, that meant living quite alone in an eight-foot cubicle. I was therefore unpopular with everyone else in the tenement, I suspect; but my job being to think, I *needed* privacy.

"Lewisohn?" It was a word spat out, not really a question, from the murk behind the flashbeam on my eyes.

I couldn't answer . . . my tongue was a block of wood between stiff jaws.

"It's him," grunted another voice. "Where's the gahdam switch?" He found it, and light glared from the ceiling.

I stumbled out of bed. "Get a move on, there," said the corporal. He took the bust of Nefertiti, one of the three inanimate things I loved, off the shelf and threw it at my feet. A piece of shattering plaster bruised me.

The second thing I loved, Sarah's picture, got a revolver barrel driven through it. One of the green-clad men started for the third item, my shelf of books, but the corporal halted him. "Cut it out, Joe," he said. "Doncha know the books go to Bloomington?"

"Naw. Fack?"

"Yeh. They say the Cinc collecks 'em."

Joe wrinkled his narrow forehead in puzzlement. I could follow his thoughts, in some queasy corner of my brain. Eggheads are all suspect;

the Cinc is above suspicion; therefore the Cinc cannot be an egghead. But eggheads read books . . .

Actually, Hare was a complex man. I had known him slightly, many years back when he was only an ambitious junior officer. He had a wide-ranging, inquisitive mind, and was a talented amateur cellist. He was not hostile to learning *per se*—he had plenty of thinkers on his own staff—what he distrusted was the mind which went too far. His saying: "This is not a time to question, it is a time to build," had become a national slogan.

"Getcha clothes on, fellow," said the corporal to me. "And pack a toothbrush—you'll be gone f'r quite a while."

"Hell, he won't need no toothbrush," said another N. "No teeth by tomorrow, see?" He laughed.

"Shut up. Arnold-Lewisohn-you-are-under-arrest-on-suspicion-of-violating-Section-10-of-the-Emergency-Reconstruction-Act." That was the catchall section, which had made most other laws obsolete.

At least they won't beat me here, I thought, wishing my poor skinny frame wouldn't shake so much. At least they'll wait till we get to the station. And it may take as much as half an hour to get there and book me and start beating me.

Or even longer, perhaps. Rumor had it that the Ns first quizzed a suspect under narco. If he didn't spill the beans, they concluded he must have been conditioned, and

turned him over to the third-degree boys. But I would reveal nothing, because I knew nothing; therefore—

"My sons . . . they—" I fumbled my tongue in my mouth. "They haven't anything to do with — Could I—"

"No letters. Get a move on!"

I groped my way into my clothes. It was very dark and quiet in the street below the window. A roadable plane whispered down the pavement. I wondered where it was bound and on what errand.

"Let's go." The nearest N helped me along with a kick.

We went down the rotting stairs and came out on the sidewalk. The night air was cold and wet in my lungs. A car waited, with the Cross-and-Thunderbolt of the National Safety Corps luminous on its black flank.

The roadable plane came around the corner once more and slithered to a halt. Through hazed eyes, I saw a city police emblem on it. A man got out.

"What the hell do you want?" snapped the corporal.

Then the gas rolled over us.

I retained a wisp of consciousness. As if from very far away, I saw myself fall to the pavement. One of the Ns managed to draw his revolver and shoot before he collapsed, but his shot went wild.

A tall man stooped over me. Beneath the wide-brimmed hat, his face was inhuman with a gas mask. He got me by the arms and dragged

me to the plane. There were two others with him.

We taxied down the street and purred into the sky. The light-speckled sprawl of Des Moines fell away behind us, and we rode alone under friendly stars.

It took me a while to wake up and get over the post-anesthetic wretchedness. One of the men with me handed over a bottle. It was straight rum, and helped mightily.

The tall man in the front seat turned around. "You are Professor Lewisohn, aren't you?" he inquired anxiously. "Department of Cybernetics, New American University?"

"Yes," I mumbled.

"Good." His relief whistled out between his teeth. "I was afraid we might have rescued the wrong man. Not that we wouldn't like to rescue everyone, you understand, but we could only use *you* at the Hideout. Our intelligence service isn't perfect . . . we were told you were due to be picked up tonight, but sometimes the informers slip up."

I asked, idiotically: "Why tonight? You almost didn't make it. Why not earlier?"

"Think you'd have come . . . think you'd have believed public enemies like us, you with three sons to worry about?" he answered in a dispassionate tone. "Now you've got to join us. The Committee will warn your boys and help them disappear, but we can't hide them forever; the N Corps is bound to smell them out in time. So your only chance of

saving them, as well as yourself, is to help stage a revolution inside a month."

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Achtmann wants a cyberneticist. You'll find out."

"Say, Bill." There was a Western twang in the voice at my left. "Been wonderin'—I'm new at this game—why'd you use the gas? I could'a plugged them four goons in four seconds."

The tall man at the controls chuckled. "I prefer gas in cases like this," he said. "Those Ns are already dead men—they let an egg-head be taken away from them. This way, they'll be rather more slow about dying."

The Hideout was, of all places, Virginia City, Nevada. I could remember when it was a booming tourist trap, but in this era of scarcity and restrictions, when nobody except the highest officials owned cars, it was a ghost town. A few bearded, half-crazy squatters remained, ignored by the police as harmless, shunned by the rancher and Renoite as unconventional and therefore possible subversives.

Only . . . when those grizzled forms had tottered into the underground rooms and joined the several hundred people who never looked on the sun, their backs straightened and their voices grew crisp and they were on the Committee for the Restoration of Freedom.

It took me some days to get used to the setup. Like most folk, I had thought of the Committee as being a few scattered lunatics—like some, I had often wished it were more. And it turned out to be more, much more.

But then, it had had fifteen years in which to organize.

"We began as a bare handful," said Achtmann. "I shouldn't say 'we,' I was only thirteen at the time, but my father was one of the founders. It's grown since then, believe me, it's grown. There are almost ten million men sworn to our cause, waiting for the word. We estimate another ten million will join us when we do rise, though of course without training and organization they can't offer much except moral support."

He was a rather short young man, but lithe as a cat. His eyes were blue blowtorch flames under a wheaten shock of hair. He was never still, and he chain-smoked from his rising before dawn to his going to bed sometime after midnight.

Only the Cinc and a few others could get that many cigarets. Achtmann consumed a month's ration in a day. But the underground felt privileged to contribute to him. I did too, after the first hour.

Because Achtmann was the last hope of free men.

"Ten million people?" It seemed an impossibly large number to keep concealed. "Good Lord, how—"

"Our agents sound out various

prospects . . . oh, carefully, carefully," he explained. "The likeliest ones are finally given a narco and a psych profile is taken. If they're suitable, they're in. If not—" He grimaced. "Too bad. But we can't risk some stupid innocent pouring out the whole works."

I didn't like that part of it. I wondered if Kintyre, the tall man who directed my rescue and was fond of cats and children, if he had ever put a bullet through the head of some well-intentioned, unsuitable soul. To forget, I went on with practical questions.

"But the N dragnet must pull in some of . . . our . . . people now and then," I objected. "They must find out—"

"Oh, they do. They have a pretty fair estimate of our numbers, our general system. But so what? The organization is in cells; nobody in our rank and file knows more than four other members. There are countersigns, changed at irregular short intervals—we've learned, I tell you. In fifteen years, at the price of a good many lives and setbacks, we've learned."

Then, all at once, ten million seemed a ridiculously small number. Why, there were forty million in the armed forces and the reserves alone, not counting two million Ns and—

Achtmann grinned at me when I objected. "Just let us seize Bloomington, knock off Hare and enough Ns, and we've won. The bulk of

the people are passive, they'll be too scared to act one way or another. The armed forces—well, some of them will fight, but you'd be surprised how many officers are Committee members. And in the N Corps itself—where d'you think we get all our information?" His finger stabbed at me, he spoke with his usual feverish haste. "Look, for a long time now, ever since World War II, mediocrity has been on the march. World War III and the Hare dictatorship have simply given mediocrity a gun and a club to enforce itself. Isn't that going to gall every able-minded man in the world? Didn't it chafe you? So the intelligent, inquiring people will tend to drift into our cause—we smuggle some of 'em back into the enemy's camp—and because of being able, they soon rise high in the enemy's ranks!"

He stubbed out his cigaret and prowled about the cluttered, dusty office. "I'll agree, ten million men, loosely organized, without an H-bomb to their name, can't overthrow a planet-wide empire as things are now. But you see, Lewisohn, we aren't just going to pit submachine guns against tanks. We're going to be equipped with a weapon that will make the tanks and bombs obsolete, worse than useless! And that's where you come in."

Let it be clearly understood, Hare was not a dog unleashed from hell. He was a strong, intelligent, not

unkindly man who wrought enormous good. Don't forget, it was his work that the East and West coasts are again inhabited. Even though the radioactivity was gone, people were afraid to move back. He forced them back, gave them plows in their hands and earthworms in their soil, and regained a quarter of the continent.

I think, now, that Hare or someone like him was inevitable. After World War III, if you can call a few days of nuclear butchery followed by several years of starvation and chaos a war, the world power which is safely waited for the first country to become civilized again. Hare, an obscure brigadier, used his tattered command as a starting point. People came to him because he offered food and hope. So did other war lords, but Hare whipped them. Hare also whipped China and Egypt, when they made their own tries at supremacy, and turned all Earth into the Protectorate.

Yes, he was a dictator. But nothing else was possible. I had supported him myself, even fought in his army two decades ago. We needed a Cincinnatus—then.

"For the duration of the emergency," read the Act of Congress. There was a handpicked Congress in Bloomington, and a frightened little shadow of a President, and a rubber-stamp Supreme Court. Under the law, Hare was only Commander-in-Chief of the National Safety Corps, an executive arm in

the Department of Defense & Justice. His nominal superior was appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. He had retired from the Army to "maintain civilian control of government."

However, for the duration of the emergency the Cinc possessed extraordinary powers. And now we had rebuilt a great deal, and the world—if not quiet or content—was safely under guard, and one might think the emergency was past.

Only somehow . . . well, there was the mutant typhus epidemic, and next year there was an uprising in Indonesia, and next year the Colorado Valley Authority needed five million laborers, and next year there was a big scare about subversives, and so it went for twenty years.

Somehow, Cincinnatus never had gone back to his plow.

I didn't know the details of Committee organization. I didn't care to, wasn't allowed to, and didn't have time to. Let it merely be said that this was as carefully planned a coup as history has ever seen.

Not yet thirty, Achtmann *was* the revolution. Of course, he didn't handle all the details—he had staffs for the military, economic, and political aspects. But he kept his finger on everything, the flow of memos from his desk was incredible, and it was to him we all turned in our need.

Things just happened to work out that way. Achtmann's father

had been the guiding genius of the early days, and the son had grown up at the father's side. When the old man was found dead over his desk one morning, the young man had naturally been called on for advice—nobody else knew as much of all the ramifications—and suddenly, two years later, the Board of Directors realized that they hadn't yet elected a new president and unanimously called on the boy-wonder.

The force shield was Achtmann's baby. His unappeasable reading appetite turned up an obscure article in a physics journal, published just before the war broke out, concerning an anomalous effect observed when an electric field of a certain high strength pulsed in a certain complex pattern of high frequencies. Achtmann called in one of his tame physicists, asked him what equipment would be needed, and had the equipment stolen piecemeal and smuggled to the Hideout. After two years of work, the possibility of a force shield became clear. In the next five years, the engineering details were hammered forth. A year later, a screen generator tested out successfully. Now, two years afterward, the parts were ready for assembly.

We didn't have the facilities to machine every part into identity. Therefore each unit had to be separately phased in, a delicate operation requiring a high-speed computer plugged into the generator circuit.

I was there to service the computer.

I forgot about sleeping, almost, for the next three weeks. It was freedom I worked for, and my sons where they huddled in fear, and the memory of old Professor Biancini. The Ns might have found it necessary to string Biancini to a lamp post, but soaking him with gasoline and igniting him had been pure, pointless enthusiasm. . . .

Achtmann looked at me across the desk. His broad square face was very white, he was one of those who never dared go above ground. "Coffee?" he asked. "It's mostly chicory, but it's at least warm and wet."

"Thanks," I said.

"And you're really all done." His hand shook a little as he poured for me. "It seems hard to believe."

"The last unit was mounted and tested an hour ago," I said. "The trucks are already on their way."

"D-day." His eyes were empty, staring at the clock on the wall. "In forty-eight hours, then."

Suddenly he lowered his face into his hands. "What am I going to do?" he whispered.

I blinked at him. "Why . . . lead the revolution . . . aren't you?" I said after a long stillness.

"Oh, yes. Yes. But after that?" He leaned over the desk, shivering. "I like you, Professor. You're very like my father, did you know that? Only a more kindly man. My father was nothing but Revolution, the great holy cause. Can you imagine

growing up under a man who was not a man but a disembodied will? Can you imagine never once, in fifteen years of youth and young manhood, never once laying down the load to have a glass of beer with your friends, kissing a girl, hearing a concert, steering a sailboat over blue water? I was seventeen years old when a young couple on a day's outing blundered into Virginia City and saw too much—I ordered them shot—me, seventeen years old." His face sank back into his hands. "A lot of decent people are going to die in the next week or so . . . not just on our side. My God, do you think after ordering that I can retire to—to—what am I *able* to become?"

It grew very quiet, below his heavy breathing.

"Get out," he said finally, not looking at me. "Report to General Thomas, logistics office. You'll be needed. We'll all be needed."

As civilians—on trains, buses, planes, trucks, from the whole continent, from scattered posts of empire around the planet—our army closed in on Bloomington. The movement was not caught by the usual traffic analysis, because a carefully engineered revolt had begun in Mexico. It was a revolt doomed and damned from the start, a diversion where ragged peons met flamethrowers, but such are the necessities of war.

At various points, small towns,

farms, weed-grown fields not yet resettled, our units formed themselves and moved against the Capitol.

I am not a tactician, and I still don't know the details. My department was only the force screens. Each unit was centered around a heavy truck carrying a micropile to power a shield generator. Overhead went our aircraft, ridiculous little cubjets and limping machines salvaged from junkheaps . . . but in every squadron, one ship bore a generator.

The screen, when created, is only visible through a faint glow of ionization, as a sphere up to half a mile across. It permeates solid matter without noticeable effect. But it is a force of the same order as that which binds atomic nuclei together. And it forbids velocities above a few feet per second. A particle which travels faster and encounters the field is stopped cold, its energy of motion converted into heat.

So bullets, shells, shrapnel melt and fall to the ground. The detonation of a bomb, nuclear or chemical, involves high-speed molecules or electrons in the arming mechanism, so a bomb will not explode within the field. Radioactive dust and gas disintegrate as usual, but the energetic fragments which would normally kill a man emerge as harmless ions. Chemical toxins remain effective, but are easily guarded against.

We had machine guns and light artillery electronically coupled to the screen generators. At the moment of firing, the screens went off for the few milliseconds needed to pass through a burst aimed at the enemy.

The N Corps had armored vehicles. They lurched, huge and threatening, up into the field; and their motors stopped and their guns wouldn't shoot. Our troops would plant a magnetic mine next to such a tank and continue. As soon as their progress carried the field beyond the stalled vehicle, the mine went off.

The screens were carefully heterodyned; they did not affect the motors of our own army, or the various cybernetic controls. We did use some rather primitive methods of communication, though, since field telephones and radio were nullified.

Destroying without being destroyed, we slugged our way into Bloomington. A thousand planes were called, and broke themselves against our impervious little air force. We commanded land and sky, and could not be stopped.

But it was a slow and brutal way to travel. The Ns and some Army units blocked us with sheer mass. We trampled them down, and men with bayonets rose to meet us inside our own screens, and we ran them down with tanks. A small atomic bomb exploded just outside the shield of our forward

unit. Its gases and ions didn't get through, but the fireball light blinded some men, the infrared cooked others, the gamma radiation condemned a few to a long dying.

The bomb also removed several residential blocks, since by that time we had entered the city. Thereafter the enemy had to contend with mass panic.

Elsewhere in the nation, TV stations were seized and the film record of Achtmann played over and over. He was not a good speaker, but perhaps that only underlined the sincerity of what he told the world, that he had come to deliver men from slavery.

I rode in a jeep with Kintyre—maintenance division—as the inevitable shocks and accidents caused our generators to misbehave. It was bitterly cold inside the field, which strained out all the warm-air molecules. Afterward you could trace our course by the sere grass and trees autumnal in midsummer. Racing from unit to unit, over smashed homes and ripped corpses, shell-pocked streets and disputed basements, I went from winter to summer and back again, and it seemed curious that we, in our springtime of hope, should bring this cold.

We bumped up to the Capitol through twilight. It was burning. A sentry passed us, and we entered the grounds. Our tires bit into

lawns and flattened rosebeds. The familiar shield van was parked massive in the backyard, etched against the roar of heat and flame.

"It just quit on us," said the man with the colonel's brassard over sooty working clothes. "We want to put out this damn fire—hell, the records're in there, maybe Hare himself. The screen'll stop the fire, but we can't get a flicker out of the generator."

I called for a lantern and went to look into the van. When I plugged in my testing unit, the problem was clear enough, the soldered connection of Tube 36 had broken loose. "Easy to fix," I grumbled in my weariness, "but I'm getting tired of it. All day it's been nothing but Tube 36 here, Tube 36 there."

"That's one of the bugs we can iron out later," said Kintyre.

"Later?" I began unscrewing the main plate. "Does there have to be a later? I thought—"

"Lot of holdouts, all over the world," said Kintyre. "Maybe you know more about it, Colonel, but I think we'll have a lot of stubborn little N fortresses to squelch."

"Oh, yes." The officer looked away from the flames. "Just got word there's an armored brigade on its way. It'll be here before sunrise, and we'll have to be ready to meet it."

"We seem to hold the city, though," drawled Kintyre. "What's left of it."

"I suppose we do. Messy business. Never thought it'd be this messy. But I'm only a general superintendent in a cannery. Heck of a note, ain't it, taking a cannery superintendent and slapping a brassard on him and calling him Colonel?"

I pulled away the faceplate and joined the broken connection and called for my soldering iron. A man handed it to me. He had a rifle in his other hand, and there was a smear of blood across his face.

"Wonder if old Hare got away," said Kintyre.

"Doubt it," said the colonel. "Not a plane of theirs got off the ground here. He's probably roasting right in this house. He had his own apartment in the Capitol, you know." He shifted on his feet and groped for a cigaret. "Damn it to hell," he said querulously, "we've got the lousiest QM in history. I ordered coffee half an hour ago."

I got the generator going. The temperature skidded down toward freezing and the flames went out as if a giant had snuffed them. Under the glare of headlights, men moved forward to probe the ruins.

"We'd better get back," said Kintyre to me.

"Wait a bit," I requested. "I'd like to know what became of Hare. He murdered quite a few good friends of mine."

The body was in the west wing

apartment. It was not so burned as to be unrecognizable. He had shot his wife, to save her from the fire, but had met it himself.

The colonel looked away, sickly. "Wish they'd hurry up that coffee," he said. "All right, Sergeant, take a squad and put this thing up in front of the gates."

"What?" I asked.

"Achtmann's orders. He says we can't have a story growing up about Hare not being dead after all."

"Grisly thing to do," I said.

"Yeh," said the colonel. "But this is an emergency, you know, and we'll all have to do a lot of things we'd rather not, for the duration. Sergeant . . . no, he's busy . . . you there, Corporal, go find out what the hell became of that coffee."

I met my sons one by one, as they came out of hiding in response to the broadcasts. I could have kissed Achtmann's feet.

Then I returned to the University. I had my old room back, though so much housing had been destroyed in the revolution that I had to double up with another man.

The President had been killed by a stray bomb at Bloomington . . . poor little guy, nobody hated him. The Vice President and Cabinet had been strong Hare men. So Achtmann appointed a new executive branch. He himself refused all offices, and spent a month or so touring the country and receiving

all the honors he could be given; then he returned to the capital. An election was to be held next year when things had quieted down.

In the meantime, of course, it was necessary to stamp out the remaining N bands, and the new Federal police had to be granted special powers if they were to track down all the Hareists hidden among ordinary folk. Some units of the Army attempted a counter-revolution and were suppressed. A crop failure in China required that a great deal of rice be requisitioned from Burma, which touched off a small but bloody war with the Burmese nationalists.

I hated to think of that. I had hoped we would get off the sorry road of empire and return to the rest of the world its freedom. A new party, the Libertarian, was being formed to run a slate for national office; its chief plank was the abolition of the Protectorate. I helped organize it locally. Our opponents were the more conservative Federationists. The government in Bloomington was non-partisan, a steering committee for the duration only; but of course it could not sit on its hands, it had to take some kind of positive action in every emergency. And we had an emergency every day, it seemed.

In December the A.A.A.S. held a convention in Bloomington and I went, mostly to get away from

the roommate assigned to me. We didn't like each other much.

I left the barracks and walked out into the grimy slush of winter streets. A few tattered Christmas decorations had been strung up, but there was no real sales campaign—there was no merchandise to speak of. However, the day before there had been a colorful military parade.

I walked under a low leaden sky, huddled into my overcoat. There weren't many people around, and none of them looked very cheerful. Well, that was understandable, with half the city still charred wreckage. But I missed the Salvation Army and their Christmas carols. Hare had done away with them years ago, on the grounds that private charity was too inefficient, and the new government had apparently not gotten around to rescinding his edict. The Salvation Army people had played badly and gallantly on winter corners when I was young, and it would have been pleasant to have them back.

I passed the Capitol. A new one was rising on the ruins of the old. It was supposed to be a very ornate and beautiful structure, which sounded odd when people were living in tarpaper shacks, but there was still only a steel skeleton, cold against the sky.

I wasn't going any special place. There were no meetings this after-

noon which interested me. I only felt like walking. It was a shock when two large men grabbed my arms.

"Where you think you're going?"

I blinked. There was a high stone wall enclosing a large house to my left. "No place," I said. "Just out for a walk."

"Yeah? Let's see your ID."

I showed it to them. A car went past us, through the gates, with a bristling escort of armed men in gray uniforms. Maybe the new President lived here. I hadn't seen a newscast in weeks, too busy.

Hands patted me, feeling for weapons. "I guess he's okay," said one of the men.

"Yeah. On your way, Lewisohn, and don't come through this block again. Restricted. Didn't you see the signs?"

A man in peacock livery came running out of the gate. "Hey, there!" he called. "Stop!"

We halted. The man bowed to me. "Are you Professor Lewisohn, sir?" he asked. I nodded. "Then please come with me." I couldn't resist a smug grin at the Secret Service boys.

We went up a landscaped driveway and through a door. There were sentries on the porch, but inside, it was all butlers and luxury. At the end of a paneled corridor was a long room with a broad picture window overlooking a glass-roofed garden, tropical in midwinter.

The man who stood there turned

around as I entered. "Prof!" he said delightedly. "Come in, for heaven's sake. Have a drink."

It was Achtmann, colorful in lounging pajamas but still the same chain-smoking, unrestful Achtmann. He took my coat and handed it to a servant. Another servant materialized with Scotch on the rocks. I found myself in an armchair, with Achtmann pacing up and down before me.

"Good Lord," he said. "I had no idea you were in town, old fellow. If I hadn't happened to see you from my car . . . Why didn't you let me know? My secretaries have a list of Committee members, and any letter from one of them goes directly to me."

"I . . . out of touch—" I sipped carefully, seeking balance. "Busy and, well, under present conditions I've sort of lost contact and—"

"What conditions?" His eyes stabbed at me. "Anything wrong?"

"Oh, no, no. Tight housing, tight schedule, the usual."

"Like hell it's usual. Not for anybody who did what you did." Achtmann whirled on a dictograph. "I can guess your troubles—lousy little room, lousy commoner's ration, lousy pay . . . eh? Okay, we'll fix it." He rattled an order into the tube: effective immediately, Professor Lewisohn was to have a house at his disposal, funds equivalent to, etc., ration-free ID, etc., etc. "Why didn't you let me know?" he finished. "I've set up all the other

boys from the old Hideout gang, or most of them."

"But I don't want—" I stammered. "I don't deserve—don't throw somebody out of their house just to—"

"Shut up," he laughed. It was a boy's laugh, but there was a metal note behind it. "Quite apart from gratitude and solidarity and all that sort of thing, it's sound policy, and I won't hear no from you. The populace at large need the carrot as well as the stick. They've not only got to realize that the disloyal are punished, but see how the loyal get rewarded. Savvy?"

"What the hell kind of office do you have?" I whispered.

"Office? Position? None whatsoever. That's the beauty of it. I'm just an unofficial adviser to the President." Achtmann shrugged, wryly. "*Primus inter pares*. Somebody has to be, you realize, and I have a large following of trained men personally loyal to me, which is a big help, and this job . . . oh, call it leadership . . . is all I was ever trained for. It works out pretty well, don't you think?"

"For you it does," I said thinly.

"Hell! You think I want a hundred nosy servants under my roof? It's just part of the show I have to put on. It was Hare's mistake, being so drably correct, he never gave anyone a vicarious thrill. You can't steer an entire world out of ruin without giving it a Leader in great big capital letters."

"I thought that was what you fought against," I whispered.

"It was. It still is. Of course! Only there's so much to do. We can't turn over the reins in a week to people who for a generation haven't been allowed to do their own thinking. We can't reinstate search warrants, and habeas corpus, and due process in political trials, when several million men are plotting and jockeying to restore the dictatorship. There are still a lot of devout Hareists, you know, not to mention a hundred little lunatic groups with their own exclusive schemes for saving mankind." Achtmann lit another cigaret from the stub in his mouth.

Words, cold as ice, rattled out of him. "We can't dissolve the Protectorate and turn the foreign provinces loose, not till they've been educated and civilized, or there'll soon be another atomic war to fight. And here at home, there's so much poverty and hunger . . . how interested do you think a man is in democratic government when his children don't have bread? If we allowed it, he'd follow the first tinpot, crackpot Fuehrer who promised to feed him. We've got to restore the economy, the—"

I surprised myself by interrupting him. "For your information," I said, "I'm in the Libertarian Party."

"No matter," answered Achtmann cheerfully. "It won't be held against you. When the political parties are

dissolved, it'll simply be a question of—"

"*Dissolved!*" I choked. "But there was to be an election—"

"I'm afraid it'll have to wait a few years. Honestly, old fellow, how do you think we could hold an election with conditions what they are? I thought we could, that's why it was announced, but since then I've picked up enough facts to show me I was wrong." Achtmann chuckled. "Don't look so horrified. I'm not another Hare. *He* never admitted he could be mistaken."

"You don't have to," I mumbled. "You have no title . . . the President and Congress front for you, take the blame for your errors and excesses, and you get all the credit for whatever goes right. Oh, yes."

"Ridiculous!" For a moment he was angry. Then he turned his back on me and stared out the window.

As if on some hidden signal, the butler catfooted in and held my coat for me. I stood up, shakily, and began putting it on.

"Don't worry, Professor," said Achtmann in a mild voice. "All right, if you insist, this is a dictatorship. But it's a benevolent one—hell, you know me and what I stand for, don't you? We may have to kill a few here and there, and people in this town are beginning to call me the Cinc, but—" He still didn't face me:

"It's only for the duration of the emergency."

ON HAND: A Book

by THEODORE STURGEON



STURGEON had a revelation.

For twenty years he has been defending s f against its lay critics, especially those who buy on the open market anything which calls itself s f, sieve it with a warp and a woof, and dish up the cruddiest bits to the *Saturday Review* or the *New Yorker* with the smarmy comment that This Is Science Fiction. It isn't as easy as one might think to argue with these people, primarily because they really do take their horrible examples out of the s f field, a field which is, they inform the world, ninety-percent crud.

And on that hangs Sturgeon's revelation. It came to him that s f is indeed ninety-percent crud, but that also—Eureka!—*ninety-percent of everything is crud*. All things—cars, books, cheeses, hairstyles, people and pins are, to the expert and discerning eye, crud, except for the acceptable tithe which we each happen to like.

Then why is it that s f, alone among all literary genres, is consistently tarred with its own worst examples by the very people who effortlessly discriminate between, say, Hopalong Cassidy and something like *The Oxbow Incident*, between the quality of a Spillane and that of a Ngaio Marsh? . . . Sturgeon's guess is that it has to do with the same thing that caused Boccaccio's contemporaries to promulgate so much gusty humor about monks and nuns, and which has caused today's glut of japes and gibes at the psychiatrist. It's an act of reverence—more; a *fear*, in the Old Testament sense. Each man kills the thing he loves, it is said; and some tend to poke fun at the things they respect, now (when tight barriers of terror wall off the vacuum left by Mencken and Will Rogers) less than previously, but still more than is tolerable to the devout. And so it is that s f gets attacked by the layman—not because of what it is (they don't know what it is) but because it carries 'Science' on its label. You see, anything with Science in it isn't *allowed* to be ninety-percent crud. When they find crud in it (and forget what was said above about a sieve; you can sieve up crud out of our dear field with a coal scoop) they get scared. Living in a cultural matrix dominated by the specter of

Science, they will not tolerate a suggestion that we-uns are snearing it; or worse, the frightful hint that maybe Science is, after all, ninety-percent crud like everything else. Of course, they don't know what s f is, but they think *we* think it's Science, and they want no part of us. Hence our really fine ten-percent hides in our vintage cellars except when somebody like Vercors or Orwell or even Shepherd Mead steams off the label and wholesales it in the Main Street markets.

A most revelatory revelation, you may well remark, but has it anything to do with what's On Hand?

Sturgeon says it has, and cites *EYE IN THE SKY*, by Philip K. Dick (Ace No. 211, 255 pp, 35¢) saying, here is a heady jest, the first book since Fredric Brown's *WHAT MAD UNIVERSE* in which, within the plot's stated and legitimate framework, anything—but *anything*—can happen. It is a book harmonious to this discussion of revelation because it is full of revelations—just how many, and of which kind, being a function of the eye of the beholder and dependent upon its depth of focus.

This glorious jape is, briefly, the story of an accident to a bevatron, in which eight people, in falling a considerable distance, pass through the highly energized beam. They recover and return home, sharing the feeling that something is vaguely amiss; but when an irreverence gets you a mysterious nip in the leg, and a lie brings a plague of locusts, the feeling gets less vague. From there it takes off madly, in wild hyperbolic sweeps of unabashed imagination. Two guys ride to heaven on an umbrella, and there's a house which eats people. Characters are killed, and restored for the next go-around to try it over. The earth comes to an end more than once. How this happens is Mr. Dick's business—and he makes it yours. And what happens to you is worth eleven times the price and all your rereading time. Oh yes, you have to read it over again.

The thinking, the thinking—that's what's so special about the book. It's great fun, mind you, a donnybrook, a brawl. But it's the deft fun of a shrewd observer, a good man with telescope, microscope, scalpel. Here's a man who knows what he thinks about the witch-hunting aspects of national security, about marriage and religion and paranoia and beer, about whether or not cows should wear trousers in public, and the machine age, and race, and Communism. If you want to see the workings of the lay mind that guards and defends Science from us, read as a fable the guardianship and defense of the particular Deity herein.

And if it appears to you, as it did to Sturgeon, that Dick presents some of these things in extreme terms, think it over the next day. You may find yourself, too, granting the author the extremities, the occasional

black-and-white characterizations, and even the incredible unmasking of the unbelievably villainous villain at the end; he has a story to tell and a point to make, and like the man who was asked why he never peeled them, he can answer, "When I eats a banana I eats it, I don't mess with it."

And so, *phil k dixi*, which means,

I like it and that's all I have to say.

Offhand—



BOOK	TYPE and TIME	BUY IT—	REMARKS
<i>The Seedling Stars</i> James Blish Gnome Press 185 pp \$3.00	Novelized collection. Near-to-far future.	—especially for the re-done <i>Surface Tension</i> .	An intriguing concept well worked out.
<i>The Case Against Tomorrow</i> Frederik Pohl Ballantine #206 150 pp 35¢	6 stories. Near future.	—at this price, certainly.	A mixed batch, some clever, some "clever."
<i>City on the Moon</i> Murray Leinster Avalon 224 pp \$2.75	Novel. Near future.	—for its believable moon but not its unbelievable people.	Leinster's heroes' infinite resource, inevitable invincibility, infuriate.
<i>The Naked Sun</i> Isaac Asimov Doubleday 187 pp \$2.95	Whodunit s f. Future.	YES!	Probably best s f whodunit yet. Wonderful switch ending.
<i>Colonial Survey</i> Murray Leinster Gnome Press 185 pp \$3.00	Novelized collection. Future.	—only if you like all Leinster.	Unusual problems, facile solutions in one-to-one relationship.
<i>The Infinite Brain</i> Charles Long Avalon 224 pp \$2.75	Novel. Near and far future.	—for a paperweight.	Many wonders, no surprises.
<i>Big Planet</i> Jack Vance Avalon 223 pp \$2.75	Novel. Future.	—if as a child you liked Burroughs.	What Boucher calls a Journey. Adventure and keen astonishments.
<i>Things</i> , ed. Grigson and Gibbs-Smith Hawthorn Books 466 pp \$12.50	SPECIAL NOTE. I've learned that this big, beautiful treasure-chest of a book, with its companion volumes, <i>People</i> , <i>Places</i> and <i>Ideas</i> , now comes boxed at a substantial saving. If I can get the other three in time, they will be the subject of next issue's ON HAND.		

Erratum: Obviously under the impression that THE WINDS OF TIME, by Chad Oliver (Doubleday) was worth more than list, Sturgeon reported it at \$3.95 instead of \$2.95. So be it. So buy it.



THE WINDS OF SIROS

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

A cave on unknown Siros with the wind moaning by . . .

*A skinny, scared kid, a tough adventurer, and two women
held prisoner by hostile aliens.*

And hate building up—hate more dangerous than the aliens. . . .

THE COLONIST-FERRY *Gegenschein* sounded its final warning honk and Mart Devers got off into the safe zone along with the other colonists and watched the ship go.

It was almost like dying, like finishing a life hardly begun. After the ship had vanished in the cloud-muddied sky, Mart Devers realized for the first time how dreamlike and unimportant his past was becoming, how immediate and uncertain his future loomed.

He stood by himself, nervously, looking at the seared place where the *Gegenschein* had been. The colonists had been deposited in a sandy clearing at the shore of a glittering lake; not far away there was a dark, ominous-looking forest, and high beyond rose arching cliffs. The forest either was or was not inhabited by humanoid alien beings, depending on whether you believed Dave Matthews' interpretation of what he claimed to have seen lurking there five minutes af-

ter the landing—or the survey team's tentative report that this continent of Siros had no intelligent life.

Chill winds swept down on Devers and the others as they waited for the Colony Director to organize things, to take charge.

They were a motley, ill-assorted bunch, as any batch of forced colonists had a right to be. The hundred of them had been grabbed up by the lottery, thrown together roughly by the untender mercies of a giant analog computer, and packed off like cattle on a tenth-class ship to colonize Siros.

Devers wasn't happy about it. A doctor in embryo only—a shivering skinny twenty-year-old college pre-med who would never have to worry about medical-school applications now. A flip of the wheel, a random twitch . . .

. . . and they threw you onto a planet like Siros. They ripped you out of your old life and told you

to build a new one, on a cold wind-swept planet where shadowy alien shapes skulked through the dark forest.

A hand grabbed Devers' shoulder firmly. He turned.

"You look lousy," Ky Morgan said to him.

"I feel lousy. Mind?"

Morgan shrugged. "Your privilege, kid. But you better stop brooding about Earth. Earth doesn't exist any more as far as you and me are concerned. There's just Siros."

"I know. But it takes a while to get used to it," Devers said.

"We been here three hours, and we'll be here a little longer. . . . Well, I'll see you. Time for wife-picking's coming up—think I'll go look over the merchandise."

Morgan strode springily away toward a nearby clump of women. Devers' eyes followed him, and he wondered again what made the big man tick.

Morgan was a Volunteer.

He was something special, a broad, big man who had put his name on the line for voluntary selection, and who hadn't cared what world he was sent to. Aboard the *Gegenschein*, men got out of his way when he came by. His skin was tanned till it looked like expensive morocco or cordovan, and his voice was a heavy growling rumble. He wore his Volunteer's status like a badge of merit—which it was.

Devers wasn't any Volunteer. He looked round the group at the others. Neither was Lora Hallinan, the wide-eyed, innocent-looking girl down there, and neither was Sherry Leon, who didn't look so innocent. And neither were any of the other ninety-six, for that matter.

Down in the clearing, Phil Haas, the Colony Director, was standing on a packing-crate, blowing his whistle. Time to get things set up. Devers joined the gathering group.

"We're on our own now," Haas said, speaking loudly to fight the whistling wind. "That ship isn't coming back. And we've got plenty to do. Let's set up the stockade and inflate the domes."

A voice from the back—Dave Matthews' voice—said, "Phil, what about those aliens I saw? You think we ought to have a permanent patrol?"

Haas frowned. "I'm still not so sure those were aliens you saw, Dave. The survey team didn't find any such things here—"

"So they didn't look!"

"Dave, if you want to discuss this further, take it up with me in private. We can't spare men for a patrol until the stockade's been built. Besides which, your aliens are probably more afraid of us than we are of them." Haas chuckled. "Let's get busy. Plenty of things to do by nightfall—including the marrying. Today's June 30, 2342. If we get set up by midnight, we can all still have June weddings."

Mart Devers hadn't figured on getting married quite so soon. He had been supposed to graduate from Ohio State the following year, and he had planned on medical school, interning, a good practice and then—not before—a wife.

He drew his jacket tighter around himself. Like most thin people he had little use for cold weather and that damned nor'wester that seemed to rip down on them constantly.

Haas was talking to Morgan and three or four of the strongest men of the group working out the set-up plans. There was a fixed procedure for setting up a new colony—a procedure that had worked well on the hundreds of worlds to which humanity had spread. First you established a stockade, marking the original boundaries of the colony. Then you inflated the bubble-houses that would be the homes of the colony. And then you expanded. You built outward into the alien wilds, you went forth and multiplied. And, one by one, new Earths were brought into being across space by grumbling, miserable pioneers.

Devers stole a look at the little group of women. Most of them, through a fluke in the lottery, were older than he—twenty-five, twenty-six at least. Lora Hallinan, at twenty-two, was closest to his age.

She was slim, full-breasted, with brown hair, black eyes. Pretty. Too pretty, Devers thought ruefully. When the time came for the picking, she'd be taken early.

He wondered about the other girls. Sherry Leon, for instance—tall, brassy, a little overblown. About thirty, and she looked as if she'd been through a lot. The impartial scoop of the lottery seized all kinds.

Well, one of them was going to be his wife on this bitter world. Turning, Devers peered at the wind-tossed forest, feeling a strange uneasiness.

It took seven hours of backbreaking work to get the preliminary lay-out of the colony off the improvised charts and into actuality. Devers joined one of the work gangs; while the men erected a stockade, the women unpacked the sealed packages of provisions and tools and other vital belongings.

It was nearly nightfall, and giant Vega had dipped far below the horizon, when the job was done. Phil Haas blew a quick blast on his whistle.

"Okay. We're all set up." He looked at the fifty small bubbles that would house fifty couples that night, at the fifty-first bubble, the big one that would be the central gathering-place of the colony.

"Good job," Haas said. "Let's finish it off, now. Wives."

"Yeah. Wives," grunted Ky Morgan. He dropped his axe and strolled to the center of the clearing.

Devers tensed. His stomach felt strange, and his hands were cold.

Wives. In a few hours, he was going to have a woman for the first time. . . .

Haas organized the women into a group. Sherry Leon was smiling, openly expectant. But some of the others—those who had dreamed of a different sort of wedding-night—they were apprehensive, worried, pale.

Haas unfolded a sheet of paper. He looked a little apprehensive himself. "The time has come to couple off," he said, "as arranged by the terms of the colonial charter. You know the system. As a Volunteer, Ky Morgan has the right to choose first. I get second pick, as Colony Director. After that, we proceed in order of Wheel Number—an order known only to me. . . .

"Morgan, name your choice."

Morgan stepped forward, smiling calmly. He was the biggest, most aggressive male in the group, and knew it. He ran his eyes carelessly down the row of females; a strange mixture of emotions appeared on fifty feminine faces.

After a moment of silence, he grinned and said, "Okay. I pick Sherry Leon."

Devers realized he had been holding his breath, praying for Morgan to bypass Lora Hallinan.

Haas said, "Miss Leon, is this choice agreeable?"

Sherry Leon stared levelly at Morgan. There were wrinkles creasing the skin around her eyes,

and her smile looked artificial. "I guess so," she said. "If he wants me, I'll go."

Devers heard people snickering. A little testily Haas said, "This is marriage, Miss Leon. It's not just for tonight."

"None of your damned piousness!" Sherry snapped. Then, shaking her head, she said, "I guess I earned that. Okay. I'll take Morgan."

Devers watched the couple walk off to take their pick of house-site. *No ceremony?* he wondered. *But—*

But it's a new world, he told himself. *A brand new world.*

Haas was next, and to no one's surprise picked Mary Elliot, who accepted. At thirty-eight she was the oldest woman in the group; she and Haas had kept constant company on ship.

Haas then referred to the list and announced that Lee Donaldson had next pick. Donaldson named Claire Lubetkin; she wavered indecisively, finally accepted him. After Donaldson came Howard Stoker. He picked Rina Morris.

But Rina Morris shook her head. "Sorry. I'll wait."

Stoker shrugged. "Guess I get another pick, then. Well, Lora Hallinan."

Devers whitened. Haas said, "Sorry, Howard. Regulations don't give you a second choice until everyone else has spoken."

Stoker scowled bitterly, spat, returned to line. "Mart Devers," Haas called out.

Stunned at the reprieve, Devers reddened, stepped forward awkwardly. "L-Lora Hallinan," he said.

"Miss Hallinan?"

Devers waited. It was years before she finally said, "Accepted."

He and Lora picked the bubble-house that adjoined Morgan's. The domes were empty, merely arching shelters against the downslanting winds, but they did provide a place to sleep if you didn't mind the ground. Colonists weren't supposed to mind the ground, until there was time to build beds.

"I hadn't expected it to be like this," she said suddenly. "Not at all."

"Neither had I. What did you do on Earth?"

"Do? Oh—I was a stenographer. Typist, mostly. I was living at home, waiting around to get married. Well, now I *am* married—sort of."

Devers was disappointed. He had hoped she was an actress, a writer, maybe a singer. Well, a stenographer would have to do. "I was going to college," he said. "Pre-Med, Ohio State. I guess *that's* all finished." He laughed—a nervous, brittle laugh. Overhead, Vega's last rays were fading from the sky.

They tried to make conversation

for perhaps ten minutes. It wasn't much good.

"It's like a blind date," Lora said. "A blind date that's for keeps." There were beginning tears in her eyes.

"We'd better make the most of it," Devers said. "You know what I mean. It's going to *be* this way, now that our number came up."

She nodded. And then, after a frozen moment, he found himself kissing her. It was a tender, tremulous sort of kiss, and it had hardly started when it was interrupted by a harsh yell from Morgan's adjoining bubble.

"You hear something?" he asked.

"It sounded like Morgan. Do you think he's having trouble with Sherry?"

"*Hey, Devers! Help!*"

Mart stepped outside the bubble, into moonless blackness. He blinked, trying to see.

Morgan and Sherry were outside their dome, and Morgan was yelling. Dark shapes surrounded them.

"Get away!" Morgan yelled. "Devers! Run! Get help!"

Devers froze, not knowing which way to turn. Six or seven dark stubby figures—inhuman figures—clustered about the struggling Morgan and Sherry. Devers saw hunched, neckless silhouettes, thick shoulders, corded arms. . . . He was too sick to run.

Something cold grabbed him, and just then he heard Lora scream. Other colonists were com-

ing, now. Devers squirmed, wriggled, kicked. He was held tight.

"Mart!"

"I can't do anything, Lora. They've got me too."

"It's the aliens," came Morgan's voice. "The ones Matthews saw. Hostile aliens." His booming voice seemed to carry all over the colony ground. "Aliens!"

Devers felt himself being hoisted from the ground. Two powerful hands gripped his ankles, two his shoulders. He swayed—and moved.

Dark shapes, and darker jungle. After a while, he stopped trying to break free.

II

Going up the side of the mountain was the worst part of the kidnapping, Devers thought.

The aliens had borne him through the thick forest endlessly. Perhaps it was two hours—it seemed more like two months. Finally they broke from the thicket and Devers could see the bald, bare faces of the jutting cliffs.

And they began to ascend.

The aliens had thick pads on their palms and on the soles of their feet. Suction pads. They gripped him firmly, at shoulders and feet, and started to ascend the naked face of the cliff. He swung dizzily back and forth as they rose, climbing the unvegetated rock as if it were a ladder.

Then the upwardness ended, just when Devers thought his mind

would snap. They had arrived at a cave of some sort, hewn into the face of the rock. And there the aliens left him. They put him down with surprising gentleness, leaving him to lie in cold, moist sand, turned their backs on him, walked away.

He sensed other aliens moving about. He wondered if the whole colony were to be carried off and deposited here. *The survey-team said the planet was uninhabited, he thought reproachfully. But Dave Matthews gets the last laugh.*

He thought about the interrupted kiss—the interrupted wedding-night. Then, about the interrupted colony.

A sound of sobbing came from somewhere to his right in the total dark. As background he heard the gentle murmuring sound of flowing water, somewhere in the cave.

"Who's there?" he asked. "Who are you?"

"Lora. That you, Mart?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"In sand, someplace. I can't see. What's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know," Devers said. "Don't move. I'll try to find you. Damn this darkness anyway!"

"Devers, is that you?" asked Morgan's voice.

It came from someplace deeper in the cave, highlighted by resonating echoes. "Yes," Devers said. "And Lora's here too. Anyone else?"

"I am," said Sherry Leon.

Her declaration echoed around the cavern. "I guess it's just the four of us, then," Morgan said flatly when the echoes died. "What the hell do they want with us?"

Nobody answered. Outside the cavern mouth the endless wind whipped around the mountains, whistling, moaning. Devers shivered. He had never experienced darkness of this sort before. He felt alone, very young, a little frightened, a little sick.

He started to crawl across the cold wet sands. Evidently the brook he heard ran not too deep under the sand, close enough to the surface to impart a chill, and came bubbling out a few hundred yards deeper in the cave. No one spoke; there was steady sobbing, but he had little hint of direction.

"Lora! Lora!"

On hands and knees he groped in the blackness. After minutes, a warm hand grazed his.

"Thank God," he said. Blindly he reached out and touched a yielding body. Arms gathered him in. He almost felt like sobbing.

He clung to her wordlessly in the darkness, as if the girl were the one real thing in a universe of cobwebbed nightmares. Gradually warmth came to him, and forgetfulness, and a stirring. After minutes of urgent action he relaxed, and after a while he slept.

Later, morning flooded brightly into the cavern. Devers woke reluctantly, groggily, from a bizarre

dream of alien worlds. He looked around.

With a dull sense of shock he discovered he had spent his wedding night with Sherry Leon. . . .

Daylight showed Lora lying about a hundred feet up-cavern, a pathetic little bundle sprawled on the sand. She was still asleep.

And at his side, Sherry also slept—her clothes disheveled, her bright blonde hair streaming every which way (*the hair I stroked so lovingly last night*, Devers thought guiltily). He felt as if he had soiled himself.

Morgan was there too, far back in the cavern. But he was awake. He was sitting up, arms clasped across his knees, looking amusedly at Devers.

"Seems you got mixed up a little last night," Morgan remarked wryly. He didn't look concerned. "Your gal's up here, you know."

Devers reddened. "I—it was dark—did you—?"

Morgan grinned and said, "Mistakes happen. No, I didn't touch your sweetie. Couldn't find her, to tell you the truth. But I'm not put out about Sherry. You weren't the first with her; I'm not going to be the last, either."

With one easy gesture Morgan pushed himself to his feet and came down-cavern. "These women will sleep through anything," he said. "Christ, you look awful."

"How am I supposed to feel? Who knows where the hell we are?"

What are those aliens planning to do to us—we may be stew by lunchtime." Devers' voice sounded thin and high in his ears.

"I doubt it. But let's take a look."

Together they moved to the lip of the cavern. Devers gasped.

They were at least eighty or a hundred feet above the flat, dull-brown surface of Siros. The cave was inset in an almost vertical rise of cliff. And on the distant ground below, a few of the aliens moved in aimless patterns.

"Look," Devers said. "That must be the colony, all the way out there!"

Morgan nodded. "A good ten miles or so. This is the damndest flat world I ever saw, except for these cliffs. . . . Nasty bunch down there."

Devers stared down at the aliens. They were yellow-brown—heavily furred, he saw, neckless, thick-bodied. He could make out the purpleness of the suction-pads on their palms.

"It's a long drop," Devers said.

The bigger man grinned. "Damned right. I'd say we're stuck here a while."

"Thinking alike, they turned to survey their new home.

The cavern slanted downward, ending a long way back at a wall of rock beyond the penetrating range of the sunlight. Far to the back of the cave the little stream gushed forth, coursed along the cave floor, and dropped below the

surface again, forming a small, fast-flowing narrow lake. The morning air was cold and brisk; the wind wailed past the cavern-mouth.

Devers felt hungry. "Suppose we're left here to starve to death?"

"We'll eat each other," Morgan said. "Women and children first." He yawned, showing sharp, strong teeth, and Devers half-thought he was serious.

Yet he was glad Morgan was here. The older man radiated strength and competence and courage, all attributes Devers knew he himself conspicuously lacked. Morgan was an adventurer. He had been a Volunteer. That took a kind of courage Devers could hardly begin to understand, and he respected Morgan for it.

"Let's go wake up the women-folk," Morgan suggested.

The four of them stood around and looked at each other. Just looked. And Devers saw suddenly that life in the cave was going to be complicated.

Morgan was eyeing Lora's trim figure and high breasts with an unconcealed curiosity. Sherry seemed divided: she was glaring at Morgan in a wifely, almost henpecking manner, and yet frankly studying Devers in a way both maternal and openly possessive. The girl wanted everyone.

"We're not going to have much privacy," Morgan said at last, breaking a silence so taut it

crcaked. "I don't know how long we're stuck up here, either, but I'd guess we don't get out until someone gets us out. Its a long way down."

"Those aliens," Lora said. "They're down there just *watching* us?"

Morgan nodded. "We're penned up here, and they can come get us any time they want. But we can't get out."

"And I don't suppose the colony gives much of a damn about us," said Sherry Leon.

Devers said, "The colony doesn't even know where we are. If there still is a colony."

Morgan nodded. "That's a point. They may have everybody cooped up, four to a cave. Or they may have snatched just us. There's no way of telling."

"What are we going to do about food?" Sherry Leon said.

Morgan shrugged. "We can't eat sand. Maybe the aliens will bring us something, maybe they won't."

"Suppose they don't?" Lora said.

"Then there are three things we can do. We can sit around in here and starve to death, we can take turns eating each other, or we can jump out of the front of the cave. I'd recommend the last idea. It's quicker."

It was getting close to noon, Devers figured, and he was awfully hungry. The wind hadn't let up its furious keening, and the sun

was high overhead. He walked to the lip of the cavern, peered down the vertiginous height, saw the aliens looking upward at him. There were about twenty of them, clumped together below. He turned away.

Suddenly, he heard a thump behind him.

Surprised, Devers whirled and saw the purple suction-pad of an alien flash and disappear. A bundle lay at the mouth of the cave.

It was wrapped in a reddish-yellow animal hide, shaggy and rank, and tied with some sort of crude twine. Frowning, he undid the package, which was about the size of a man.

"Hey, food!" he yelled. "They brought us food!"

As the others came crowding around, he spread out the provisions. The largest item was a freshly killed animal, small, chunky, vaguely pig-like. A stiff little tail thrust out sharply at them. There was a deep gash in the animal's throat, but otherwise it was whole. Tied to it with twine was a short, sharp knife made of some shiny obsidian-like mineral.

There were also several clusters of milk-white fruits the size of large grapes, and some oblong, blue, gourd-like vegetables. Devers' mouth watered.

"Well," said Morgan, "apparently they intend to feed us. I hope they're not fattening us for a sacrifice."

"We'll find that out soon enough," said Devers. "When we get fed again. It may not be for a week."

Using the blade, Morgan sliced into the animal, while Devers and the women watched, fascinated. The big man carved with the skill of a professional butcher. He laid the animal open speedily, pulling back flaps in its underside, and scooped out the entrails. He dumped them to one side; they were slimy and oozing with blood. The blood was red.

"At least the alien blood is the right color," Morgan said, as he sliced chunks of meat from the creature.

Lora shuddered. "I've never eaten raw meat. Isn't there some way we can make a fire?"

"No," Morgan said emphatically. He glanced up. "I know you didn't want to come on this trip, baby. But you're here now. You'd better be ready for worse things than raw meat."

They ate—a strange, silent, almost shamefaced meal. Devers was hungry, but the sticky blood that ran between his fingers and pasted them together made him queasy, and he could see Lora having trouble choking the meat down. It had an odd, pungent taste about it, even raw, that made it more appealing than it might have been otherwise.

There were ten of the blue gourds. Morgan doled them out one

to each and put the remaining six aside. "In case we don't get fed again too soon. These things keep. The meat won't."

The gourds tasted sour and had a stringy, unpleasant texture. But they were nourishing. Devers finished his quickly and turned to the white grapes. These were doughy, dry, and not very good.

When everyone was through, Morgan gathered together the remnants of the meal and hurled them from the cavemouth. After a distinct pause came the *thud* of landing.

"Why'd you do that?" Devers asked.

"To show them that we liked the stuff. No better way than to toss back a fleshless carcass. Anyway, we can't have that junk around here. Bad for sanitation."

Sherry Leon grinned uneasily. "Sanitation. Glad you brought that matter up. This hotel don't have such good furnishings."

"We'll set up a couple of latrines up here near the cavemouth. Better ventilation that way," Morgan said. "All the comforts of home."

"What's a latrine?" Lora asked.

"It's a hole in the ground, baby. Just a hole in the ground. You use it. One for menfolk, one for womenfolk, if you like."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. Devers felt embarrassed for her, and Sherry Leon's cold tinkling giggle didn't help any.

Morgan pointed upcavern, where

the little stream split the sand into two roughly equal sectors. "Look here, Devers. You and Lora take the far corner up there, on the right. Sherry and I'll stay on the left, a little lower down. That's for sleeping. It's the best arrangement we can make. This place is like a goldfish bowl."

Devers shrugged. "We'll have to manage." He rose, walked to the front of the cave, peered out. Seven or eight aliens squatted on the ground below, looking up.

"They're watching us," he said. "Just *watching*. As if we're caged pets."

"Maybe we are," Morgan said. He scooped up a handful of moist sand, compressed it until it was a hard ball, and angrily tossed it down at the aliens. It broke apart in midflight and showered harmlessly down. Morgan turned away, cursing.

Four people in an escape-proof cell a hundred yards long and perhaps fifty feet wide, without fire, without anything but themselves. And they hadn't learned yet to like each other much.

The day dragged horribly. There was nothing to do but stare at each other, talk, tell jokes. And there was little to talk about. Morgan spoke when he chose, and never just for the sake of speaking. Lora's conversation seemed to be limited to faint hopes and fears; Sherry's, to dirty jokes and acid-tipped rem-

iniscences. Devers found little to say to himself, and stared broodingly at his muddy feet.

"I opened at the Lido on the 24th," Sherry was saying. "Reverse strippo. I came out in sequins and g-string and went off in an evening gown twenty feet long. Christ, I wish I had that evening gown. I wish I was back there. I wish I was anywhere."

"We aren't going to get out," said Lora in a dead-flat voice. "We're just going to stay here and rot. There are times I feel like jumping out and—"

"Lora!"

"Simmer down, Devers," Morgan said. "She hasn't done it yet." He stood up and stripped off his shirt and shoes. "I've got an idea. Not worth much, but at least I can try it."

"What are you going to do?" Devers asked.

Morgan unsnapped his trousers. "That underground stream. I'm going to get in there and wander around a little. Maybe it comes out somewhere—maybe we can get out the other side."

He picked up his clothes, and, wearing only briefs, walked up-cavern to the place where the stream broke the surface of the cavern floor. "Come on with me, Devers. If you hear me yell, come in after me."

Morgan tossed down his clothes, stepped out of his briefs, and entered the water. It was knee-deep

as he waded upcavern, then abruptly grew deeper.

Uneasily Devers said, "That's dangerous, Morgan. You may get trapped underneath somewhere. I won't hear you if you yell."

Morgan looked back. His lips were blue, and he was shivering, but he smiled. "So? What of it?"

He reached the point at which the stream dipped below ground level again and swept back into the mountain. Devers heard him suck breath in gaspingly, and then Morgan went under. Devers started to count.

Thousand one, thousand two, thousand three . . .

. . . thousand ten . . .

"Where is he?" Devers heard Sherry ask. He turned and saw both women standing behind him. That annoyed him; he didn't want Lora to see Morgan's naked body when and if he came out.

"He went under," he said. *Thousand fifteen . . . thousand twenty . . . thousand twenty-five . . .*

"Been gone half a minute," Devers said. He kicked off his shoes, knowing he'd be expected to go in after Morgan and try to find him. He started to shiver a little . . . *thousand thirty-six . . .* How long could a man stay under water? Even a man like Morgan?

"You oughta go in and look for him," Sherry said. "He may be drowning."

"Yeah. I know." *Thousand forty*

. . . The counting mechanism in his mind was functioning automatically now . . . *thousand forty-two . . .* With a cold hand Devers started to strip.

Suddenly Morgan broke surface, head first—leaping up high above the water, gasping for breath, plunging like a sounding whale. Choking, retching, he came up again, battled the swift current an instant or two, pulled himself to the edge of the water. Devers grabbed his arm and tugged him up on the sand. He was blue all over; great goosebumps covered him. He lay there, face down in the sand, drawing in breath with great sobbing sighs. Finally he looked up.

"Cold," he said. "Cold!"

"You find anything?" Devers asked.

Weakly Morgan shook his head. "Not a damned thing. Followed stream far as I could. Nothing. Came back . . . couldn't find outlet." His teeth chattered—he shivered uncontrollably, convulsively.

"He'll freeze to death," Lora said. "We ought to warm him up."

Devers felt angry. Morgan's wild swim had been nothing but a grandstand play; showboating, nothing more. "He'll warm up by himself," Devers grunted.

Sherry glared at him. "The hell he will. I'll take care of him." Devers looked at her, startled. The blonde was wriggling out of her clothes. He glanced away, reddening.

Whitely nude, she lay down in the sand next to Morgan. She put her arms around him.

"You go away," she said without looking up. "I'll keep him warm."

Later, as the big sun dipped toward night, the four of them sat at the cavemouth, together and not together. The wind seemed to be blowing directly into the cave. No more food had come that day—the aliens obviously planned to give them just one meal a day, if that.

"We need a hostage," Morgan said, talking more to himself than the others. "It's the only way. Tomorrow we hang around the cavemouth until they bring the food—if they bring the food. The alien shows up, we grab him."

"What good will that do?" Devers asked.

"I don't know. But it's *something*, dammit! You want to sit on your can in here forever, kid?"

"We probably will," said Sherry. "Like pets. Birds in a gilded cave. Why couldn't the bastards have picked someone else? Why us?"

Night was falling. Outside, an alien bonfire flickered. "They're watching us," Devers said. "Watching all the time. They want to see what we'll do. They want to see how long it takes before we start fighting, before we hate each other's guts, before we start jumping off this damned cliff to get free."

"Shut up," Morgan said.

"I mean it! It's like a lab experi-

ment. I had them in psych class, at college. You take four rats, see, and you stick them in a cage. Or you put them on a treadmill, and toss them some food when they look bushed. That's what we are. You wait until the rats start snapping at each other, until they drop from exhaustion."

"I told you to shut up," Morgan rumbled.

He got up and clamped one heavy hand on Devers' shoulder. "Look, kid, life's tough in here. Don't make it any tougher. Quit whining or I'll toss you out the cavemouth myself."

"Yeah," Devers snapped back. "You'd like that. Just you and the two girls in here—"

Morgan slapped him, hard.

Devers took the stinging blow the wrong way, neck held rigid, and it nearly broke him in two. After a second he said softly, "Sorry, Morgan. I didn't mean to push you. But you see it, don't you? We're doing just what the aliens want! They want to see which one of us cracks first, and how he does it! They want to see us fight. They want to see us tear each other apart."

"They're just primitive savages sitting round a bonfire," Morgan said. "You're making things up. You're making up things that don't exist."

"Maybe. Maybe." There was sudden tension in the cavern. The two women were silent. Devers looked

at Morgan, and licked away the blood on his lip. "I tell you they're waiting to see us crack up."

"Well, we won't give 'em the satisfaction. We can hold out." Morgan looked toward the cave-mouth. "Damned moonless planet. No light at all out there. We'll beat 'em, though. I tell you that."

"Don't kid yourself, Morgan," said Sherry, half to herself. "It won't take long."

In the darkness, Devers cradled Lora in his arms.

His wife. Hollow mockery of a honeymoon.

Beneath the constant bubbling of the stream came the sound of Morgan's harsh laughter, and Sherry's answering giggle. They were somewhere downcavern. In the utter darkness, there was no knowing where.

Lora was warm, pliable, with a tense reserve of tight-strung nervousness. Out of nowhere she asked, "You slept with Sherry last night, didn't you?"

Even in the darkness, Devers reddened. "Does it matter? I didn't know what I was doing. She tricked me. She let me think it was you."

"Oh."

After a while she said, "How long can we stay like this? The four of us, I mean. I thought you and Morgan were going to fight today."

"Morgan can kill me with his pinky and thumb. It wouldn't

have been much of a fight. But I asked for it. I started to crack up."

She pressed hard against him.

"That was your first time last night, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Yes." Hesitantly.

"Tonight's mine."

In three days, Devers was beginning to think cave life was almost bearable. People can get used to anything, he told himself. Even living in a cold, windy cave on an alien planet.

Food came regularly, about noon each day—the same thing each time, a newly killed beast, grapes, gourds. Morgan's plan of catching an alien and holding him as a hostage proved about as practicable as flying out of the cave, or walking insectlike down the side of the mountain. The aliens flung the food package in and vanished before the watching men could move. After two days, they abandoned the idea completely.

You could get used to anything. You could get used to slimy raw meat and to grapes that weren't grapes, to a latrine dug in the sand and to living without soap or depilator or any of the other pretty things of civilization.

It developed that Morgan had few inhibitions; Sherry, less. Devers and Lora were not quite so lucky, but they learned. They learned to take baths in daylight, when you could see what you were doing and get some of the filth off, and they

learned not to listen to the sounds Morgan and Sherry made at night.

But the aliens kept constant watch and tension grew in the cave. It had to. Civilization didn't wash off as easily as all that.

It began with little things—little wormlike bickerings between them. Once Morgan objected when Devers took the largest share of the meat for himself, after Morgan had carved the day's meat allotment into four rough chunks.

"What's wrong?" Devers demanded. "You want that one for yourself?"

They snarled at each other for a second; then it died down. But it was part of the pattern.

And Sherry was halfway through an account of the perils of a chorus-girl when Lora suddenly said, with vehemence unusual for her, "How often are you going to tell that filthy story? I'm sick of it!"

"You don't like my stories, go somewhere. All we got to do is talk. So I'm talking."

"You don't have to talk the same things all the time!"

They yelled back and forth at each other for a minute or two, and next thing they were fighting, rolling over and over in a tangle of arms and legs, pulling hair, screaming, yelling. Lora was on top when Morgan and Devers pulled them apart.

The winds wailed. The aliens outside had increased in number to twenty or thirty.

The next incident came when Devers and Lora were bathing, on the fourth day. Lora had stripped, and crouched naked at the water's edge, cupping up handfuls and rubbing her face to break the shock of climbing in. A sort of convention had sprung up between them: when one couple bathed, the others busied themselves elsewhere. But Devers glanced around and saw Morgan leaning against the cave wall, watching them. Devers straightened angrily.

Morgan smiled coldly. "Something wrong?"

"What are you looking at?" Devers demanded.

"You want me to tell you?"

"Just keep your eyes where they belong!"

"Mart," Lora whispered, "Don't make trouble. Don't start a ruckus. Just ignore him."

"No," he said. "There are some things you just don't do." He became aware of Sherry's mocking eyes on him, and Morgan's. "Get into the water," he said to Lora. "I don't want him looking at you that way."

He walked downcavern to Morgan. The older man towered above him. Devers said, "Are you trying to make it worse? You didn't have to look at her that way."

"I'll put my eyes wherever I damned please. And I'm tired of your niceness. This isn't any private hotel."

"You don't have to go out of your

way to make life tough here," Devers returned. "I don't want you watching Lora when we bathe, from now on. We can at least *pretend* we're civilized—even if some of us aren't."

Morgan hit him. This time, Devers was ready for the blow; he rolled agilely and directed an open-handed slap at Morgan's face. The big man took it like the brush of a gnat's wing, laughed, and hit him. Devers sagged. He swung out wildly at Morgan, missed, swung again, and Morgan caught his flailing arm and twisted. Yelling, Devers tried to break loose, succeeded in clawing at Morgan's throat with his free arm. Morgan grabbed that too, and forced him to the ground.

"I'll put my eyes where I please," he said.

He gripped both of Devers' wrists in one big hand and slapped him a few times with the other, and threw him sprawling upcavern.

Devers lay there a little while. Lora came over. She was wet and still naked, but it didn't seem to bother her. She looked down at him, and he couldn't tell whether the look in her eyes was one of pity or contempt.

Later, he went to stare out the mouth of the cave. The clearing below was packed with aliens.

After that, there was a strange realignment of the tense relationship between the four people in the cave.

Devers suffered the most; he had acted foolishly, deliberately asking for the beating, and had lost status in Lora's eyes. That was clear. The only sort of respect she could have for him would be based on his intelligence—and he hadn't acted intelligently toward Morgan. Further, Lora really wanted a man who could take care of her—and he had not conspicuously proved himself that kind of person.

But sympathy came from an unexpected quarter—from Sherry, who glared at the invincibly self-sufficient Morgan, and offered soothing words to Devers. Morgan glared back. The swirl of conflicting emotions tightened. Both women half-loved and half-pitied Devers. Sherry was physically drawn to Morgan, and repelled by his dominance. Morgan claimed Sherry as his own, but quite clearly was interested in Lora as well. Around and around it went, while the aliens gathered outside, and the hours slid toward sundown.

Devers sat bitterly by himself, feeling that he was in disgrace. Sherry sang softly; Lora did nothing. As for Morgan, he bathed, slept for a while, woke, and flattened himself strangely at the mouth of the cave, poking his head out and staring down. After a time he came over and spoke with Sherry for a while. Then, moving on, he went to Lora and nudged her.

Devers glanced up. Morgan was saying something to her.

Sherry took a scat at Devers' side. "Don't pay any attention," she said, as Devers clenched his fists. "It was bound to happen sooner or later. Don't make him hit you again."

"Is she going to listen to him?"

"I don't know. She may."

"I hate him," Devers said. "I hate both of them. If he wasn't so damned big—"

"He is," Sherry said. "So relax." She shook out her blonde hair. It was getting stringy from lack of combing, and beginning to darken at the roots.

After a long silence Sherry said, "You know, Morgan thinks he knows a way out of here."

"What?"

"Shh . . . He says there's a ledge down below that we might reach with a rope ladder made out of our clothes."

Devers scowled. "He's got no right to keep that to himself."

"Morgan never worries about rights. Besides, he doesn't think his idea would work. Maybe we could get down, but the aliens would just bring us right back."

Devers had to acknowledge the truth of that. The momentary hope died.

Shadows deepened in the cave as the angle of sunlight sharpened. Four days, Devers thought. Four days of just Morgan and Lora and Sherry. Would it go on forever? Forever. He remembered a line from some play he once had read or seen: *Hell is other people*. Who-

ever wrote that had been right, he thought.

Lora and Morgan were laughing, there at the back of the cave. Devers made himself sit still.

The sun dipped almost out of sight; just a few red flickers remained to the day. The eternal wind howled. He looked out into the gathering night.

"I wonder how the colony's doing," he said. "Whether they're still there or not. Whether they wonder about us."

"You're always thinking, aren't you? Well, they don't have time to wonder—if they're alive," Sherry said. "They're too busy."

The light went completely. In the dark, Devers heard Lora's laugh. It sounded strange, harsh, ugly. Topping it came the deep chuckle of Morgan.

"Time to go to bed," Morgan said. "The light's out."

"Yeah," Devers said. "Time to go to bed."

He glanced at Sherry, half-visible in the gloom, and she unmistakably shook her head.

"I'll sleep alone tonight," she said. "The novelty ought to be refreshing."

Morning. The fifth day.

Lora was red-eyed and sullen, after her night with Morgan. She bathed alone, early. Morgan washed up after her, and then Devers. Sherry skipped wash.

They ate silently, Morgan di-

viding the food as usual. The aliens seemed unusually thick below. After the meal, they retired to the corners of the cave. Lora. Morgan. Devers. Sherry.

"How long are we supposed to stay like this?" Sherry asked, her voice hard. "Staring at each other like mad kids."

"Shut up," Morgan growled.

"We don't like each other," Devers said. "You'd think the aliens picked us that way, to see what would happen. You'd—"

He stopped suddenly, got up, walked to the cavemouth and looked down. As always, the height made him a little dizzy. "Yeah. Look at them," he said. "They sit down there as if they know what's happening up here. As if they're drinking in all the hate that's rising between us. As if—"

"Stop that crazy babble," Morgan said brusquely. "You hurt my ears."

Devers looked down, trying to see Morgan's ledge. Yes, there it was. Turning, he said to Morgan, "I understand you know how to get us out of here. Why the hell haven't you spoken up about it?"

"Who in hell told you that? It's not true!"

"The ledge," Sherry said. "You told me—"

Morgan slapped her. Then he said, "It won't work, anyway. Even if we got out, the aliens would put us back in."

"I know how to beat the aliens," Devers said.

Suddenly Lora started to laugh—a high shriek of a laugh, a sharply indrawn "Hoo-ha!" repeated over and over. She wasn't hysterical, though she was close to it.

"Keep quiet!" Devers shouted. "Let me talk!"

"We don't want to hear your crazy nonsense," Morgan said. "Shut your mouth."

Devers grinned oddly. There was only one way he could make Morgan listen to him. He jabbed the big man sharply in the ribs.

Morgan glared, astonished, and rumbled into action. His fists shot out blindly, crashing into Devers' stomach, pounding him under the heart. Devers fought back grimly, landed a solid blow on Morgan's lips. Then Morgan cracked him backward with two fast punches.

Devers landed hard, feeling pain lance up his body. He gasped for breath. Morgan stood over him, kicking him. Each blow was a new agony.

Finally it was over. Devers lay crumpled, shielding his face; Morgan stood over him, a strange expression of guilt beginning to cross his features. His lip was swelling.

Sitting up, Devers said hoarsely, "Okay. You were spoiling to kick me around, and now you did it. You got it all out of your system?"

Morgan looked drained of fight. He didn't speak. Devers mopped blood from his lips and went on.

He said, "Morgan, you're a strong man, and in some ways you're clever. But you couldn't figure a way out of here, and you were damned if you'd let *me* do it without beating me up first. Okay. I got beat up. Now listen to me: we can get out of here if we cooperate. All four of us.

"I don't know what kind of things those aliens are—but they aren't as primitive as they look. I think they grabbed us out of the colony and stuck us up here so they could listen in on our emotions, soak them up, feed on them. They took four of us. Four people who hardly knew one another, threw us in here, left us alone. They knew what would happen. They knew we'd start hating each other, that we'd fight and quarrel and build walls around ourselves. And it would be a sort of circus for them—a purge, maybe. Entertainment. Okay. They were right. And I'll bet they're out there now drinking it all up."

"Go on," Morgan said quietly.

"We don't *have* to hate each other. Sure, we get on each others' nerves, but we can turn the hate outward. Hate *them*. And we can do that by loving each other instead of fighting. We're playing into their hands by bickering and brawling. Let's work together and try to understand each other. I'll admit I've been as bad as any of you that way. But if we do it—hell, we'll be of no more use to them

than fighting cocks without any fight. And we can build that rope ladder and they'll let us go."

They were silent when he was finished. Finally Sherry said, "They're like parasites, then. Getting their kicks from our hate?"

"Exactly. Morgan, what do you say? You think the idea's worth anything?"

Morgan shrugged. "I don't give a damn. We can try it . . ."

At Devers' suggestion they relaxed for an hour or so, talking the situation out quietly, before starting to build the ladder. Sweating despite the chill, Devers led the discussion, showing as tactfully as he could that there was no real reason for discord in the cave.

Gradually he began to convince himself. It was the aliens who made him find Sherry instead of Lora that first night. The aliens had made Morgan stare at Lora, had brought on all the humiliation. Morgan hadn't really meant to take away Lora last night. They were just *people*. He didn't hate Morgan any more, or scatterheaded Lora, or cynical Sherry who had tricked him into a betrayal. They were only people. *Earth* people, and they each carried around their own unhappinesses.

And the others began to understand. Slowly, because they weren't quick-thinking people, the essential truth of their situation started to sink in. And the tension and dis-

trust and hatred was washing out and draining away.

Then Devers asked, "Morgan, will you show us how to build this ladder of yours?"

"Let's start stripping," he said. He peeled off his shirt and trousers and tied them together, leg to sleeve.

Lora was wearing a skirt. She handed it over. "You want my slip too?" she asked.

"Yes, but later. Up at the top we need the sturdy stuff. Devers, give me your pants."

The line was growing—ten feet long now, twenty. At Morgan's direction Devers and Sherry roamed the cave, collecting the animal-hides the aliens had used to wrap the daily food bundles in. There were four of them. Morgan added them to the line.

"Okay," Morgan said finally. "Devers, get on the other end of this thing and pull."

Devers pulled, as hard as he could, digging into the sand to resist being dragged toward Morgan. The line held.

Morgan anchored it to a jutting rock with a swift loopover, and let it dangle free. He squinted speculatively and said, "Still a couple of feet short. Let's have underclothes."

Devers grinned and said, "Coming out of the cave's like being born. We come out naked." He shivered from the cold, but the new camaraderie warmed him.

Morgan said, "I'm going to climb

down to the ledge. The girls will follow. Then you, Devers."

He grasped the line, tugged it to make sure it was fast, and lowered himself. He grinned, and Devers grinned back. "Good luck, Morgan."

"Thanks. I'll need it."

Devers watched as Morgan descended, swaying in the wind. He dangled at the end of the line, still a couple of feet short of the ledge. He let go; his feet scrabbled for purchase, and then he stood solid.

"Okay. Next one down."

Lora went next, and Sherry after her, and then it was Devers' turn. Morgan caught him around the waist as he let go of the swinging line, and pulled him in to safety.

"We're still thirty-five feet from the ground," Devers said. "What now?"

"Now you all hold on to me, while I try to yank our line loose," Morgan said. "Then we tie it on here, and do the same thing down to the ground."

He tugged at the line, grunting bitterly. Finally it snapped—in half.

"This is going to take teamwork," he said. "Real teamwork. I'll go down the rope. Devers, you follow, go right on down me and hang to my ankles. The girls will do the same, and jump when they reach your ankles. It can't be more than a six or seven-foot drop from there."

And somehow, it worked. Somehow, they stood together—huddling naked at the base of the cliff, looking up at the two ropes dangling in the wind.

There wasn't an alien in sight.

And afterward came the time to fit back into a colony that had thought them dead.

Unsheathed guns greeted them as they appeared, footsore, dirty, chilled, at the colony stockade. Then a voice said, "Christ! Those aren't aliens! It's—"

They were led inside, covered with wraps, surrounded by perhaps ten inquisitive colonists. Devers returned their glances strangely. None of them had been in the cave—and, in that measure, they were incomplete.

"Where's Haas?" Devers said.

Dave Matthews appeared. "Haas—*isn't* here any more."

"The aliens get him?" Morgan asked.

"No. Not quite. After the aliens broke in here and got you, we had some trouble. A few of us thought Haas ought to quit as Colony Director. He—got killed."

"Where were you?" Lee Donaldson asked.

"We were in a cave," Devers said. "Prisoners." He felt very tired, and yet invigorated. Tougher, harder.

"Did they hurt you?" Donaldson asked.

Devers thought for a moment. "No," he said finally. He looked

around. "Where is everybody? Busy?"

Donaldson looked away. Matthews said, "There's been trouble in the colony."

"Aliens?"

"No—each other. We sort of split into two groups. We don't get along much. It's a long story."

Devers sighed. He wanted to tell Matthews what they had learned in the cave, how the aliens thrived on strife, how the colony would never be free of the shadowy neckless things until they learned to function like parts of a well-machined instrument, as a colony should. But there was time for that later, he thought. You didn't make people see things in a minute, or in ten minutes.

He turned away. Suddenly he wanted to be alone with himself—with the *new* self that had come out of the cave. Something had grown with him in those five days, and it hadn't been just the silky beard stubbling his cheeks.

In the twilight he walked away from the group, down toward the bubble-home. His suitcase and Lora's still lay half-open on the ground.

He dressed slowly and stood for a long time, thinking. They would none of them be the same any more—not Morgan, who for the first time in his life had run into a problem he couldn't solve with his fists, or Lora, who had gone into the cave a virgin—in more than one

sense—or Sherry, whose metal shell had broken open to give him a moment of tenderness.

But Devers knew he had changed most of all, and yet not changed. The thing that was inside him, the curiousness, the seeking mind—now it was alive and working for the first time. He realized he wanted to get out and see the aliens again, find out why they were the way they were, what they wanted from them in the cave, what they were really like. He wanted to learn more about this planet. . . . He was eager to start living.

I'm different now. It was a hard fact to assimilate. He realized with a jolt, looking at Lora's suitcase, that she was his wife. She was a nice girl and would make a good wife. . . . And he didn't want her any more. The boy Mart Devers had, but that boy no longer existed.

Someone was knocking outside the bubble. "Come on in," Devers said.

It was Sherry.

She looked flustered. "You just walked away," she said. "You okay?"

"I just wanted to think. I'm okay."

"Lora's with Morgan."

"I figured as much. I don't care. Really." It was funny, he thought, how lousy deals turned out to be the biggest things in your life. Being picked by the lottery, and then being grabbed by the aliens on top of that. And losing your girl to a man like Morgan. And none of it mattered—it was all just a beginning.

An animal honked in the forest, and Devers grinned. A whole world lay out there, waiting to have its secrets pried open in the years to come. And he'd do it.

Sherry stepped forward, awkwardly. He wanted to tell her that he loved her and needed her, and that he saw behind her toughness and the scars her life had left on her. But he couldn't quite say those things, and he realized he wasn't altogether finished growing up. She would help him, though. And he would help her.

The girl before him, looking at him tenderly, was like a stranger. Everything was oddly brand new. He tipped her face up the inch or two that separated them in height, and kissed her. Content, he put his arms around her and stood listening to the wind of the alien world—*his* world.

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EXECUTIONER No. 43

by ROG PHILLIPS

I walked in the bar on Endron and ordered a bourbon.

An eight-and-a-half-foot blonde came over and said hello.

She was small for an Endronian, and kind of cute.

Gutsy, too—everybody else seemed scared to death of me.

THE PADDED SWINGING DOOR was twenty feet high and seven feet wide. I pushed it open and stepped inside, and looked down the length of the bar, seeing nothing but backs. Huge, hostile, shoulder to shoulder. Human backs, yes . . . but over two times human size.

I felt the hostility. An instinctive fear of the menace in the sheer tonnage of those backs constricted my throat, but at once a protective, compensating hatred flowed in. These were Endronians. They were human in ancestry, but the planet Endron had changed them.

I strode down the length of the bar, the backs looming above me to my right, a living cliff. Size twenty-two shoes were hooked over the rungs of the stools. The top of the bar was at my eye-level.

Though no one turned to look at me, they knew I was there, and they knew why. The silence was absolute as they waited—and hated.

I reached the only empty stool in the place. I lifted my foot to the rail, and pulled myself up. The giant to my right turned his head and looked down at me with curiously flat eyes, got off his stool, and walked away toward the back. I watched him go, and suddenly I knew he was afraid.

The herd noises gradually resumed, and from the front sounded a sudden deep rumble of protest as someone tried to leave and was turned back by the native Endronian police, who now had this building sealed off and would permit no one to enter or leave until I had finished.

The bartender was a dwarf, seven feet tall with shoulders four and a half feet wide and coffee brown eyes in a massive face that seemed molded from bread dough. He moved toward me. "Want something?" he breathed.

"Bourbon with seltzer on the side," I said, conscious that my baritone voice sounded high pitched to his ears.

If he felt any fear, he concealed it well. He reached upward, and two objects seemed to materialize in his elephantine fingers, one a half-pint shot glass of Bourbon, the other a two-quart glass partly filled with sparkling liquid and three-inch ice cubes. He put both gently on the bar in front of me. I fished out a coin and laid it down with equal gentleness. He touched it with a finger whose tip covered it completely, flicked it deftly off the bar into his palm.

Someone slipped onto the stool to my right.

It was a blonde with a husky voice, who said, "Buy me a drink, handsome?"

She had smooth white shoulders with nothing on them, a goddess-like face that looked down at me with dreamy blue eyes, satinsmooth complexion, nostrils, and lips that were oversize perfection. I saw dreams lurking in her eyes, and sick fear.

I thought of Nalda. My wife who had gone after I lost two fingers on my left hand. The same

sick fear had looked out of Nalda's eyes . . .

I glanced at the dwarf, and returned to my study of the fear in the girl's eyes.

The lazy smile on her lips congealed. She made an imperceptible motion to slide off the stool, caught the dwarf's equally imperceptible shake of the head, and remained where she was.

"Sure," I said finally.

She blinked. The smile connected to her face again. The dwarf materialized a shot glass containing a half-pint of zero-proof cold tea.

Five repetitions and fifteen minutes later I'd finished half my drink, her hand was on my knee and I was suggesting a booth.

"Can't," she said. "I have to do my dance in a minute, but I'll be back."

She slid off the stool, brushing her breast against my face. I caught the faint scent of her perfume. Then she was walking away, eight and a half feet of female, beautifully proportioned, hips swaying slightly as she moved, blonde hair draped around her shoulders like something out of Heaven. Like Nalda.

Would I choose her? I turned back to my drink.

Through the curtain behind the bar and next to the stage a well-groomed giant appeared. The pads under the smoothly tailored sportcoat he wore pushed his shoulders

out to an artificial width of fully six feet, which his thirteen feet of height could carry easily.

He sat down on the table-size piano bench, pulled his trouser legs up to preserve the razor crease. His enormous hands played over the two-inch-wide piano keys in an experimental melody with a swift and casual expertness.

I watched him. I had played the piano once myself, a long time ago . . .

His sleek head, huge as a hippo's, turned slowly as he surveyed the semidarkness of the crowded bar, pausing only briefly as his eyes rested on me. His left hand reached inside his coat and extracted a cigarette half-an-inch thick and ten-inches long, while his right hand carried the swift melody and his eyes went on searching the line-up along the bar.

A mammoth lighter appeared in his left hand. A small brush fire burst into life, moved up to the end of the cigarette. Clouds of thick smoke billowed from the huge nostrils, the big lips. The rhythm of the melody being carried by the right hand changed subtly, the left hand joined in. . . . I gripped the edge of the bar to still the ache in my fingers, my soul.

And the girl who had left me swept onto the stage on five-inch heels, trailing yard upon yard of evening dress, put on only so that it could be taken off during her strip.

"She's good," a voice to my left breathed at me, so low pitched I could feel the individual vibrations.

I glanced up at the man's face, the worry in his saucer-like eyes. He wore an unpressed suit that did not hide his beer paunch. His nose was big as my fist, his chin and cheeks were covered by a forest of stubble thick as wire and the color of rusted iron.

His voice had been anxious, fawning. When I didn't reply he said, "She's little. Not too big for you, really." His fat lips leered with intimate meaning. "She could be a lot of fun for you."

I turned my head and looked up at him. I saw the color of his face change from an unhealthy red to pasty gray, the blue lacework in the whites of his eyes become more pronounced. His mouth dropped slackly open, but he said nothing more.

I turned my attention back to the girl and her dance, the piano player with the giant cigarette dangling from his lips, the ash on it long enough to break off at any moment. After a moment I glanced to my left and saw that the stool was now vacant. I felt a vague disappointment.

The music from the piano became slow, voluptuous. The girl matched its mood with her suggestive rhythm, her dreamy mask of a smile. Every few minutes she took off something else and poised

in mock daring, waiting for the loud clapping of the dwarf bartender and anyone else in an appreciative mood. Not many customers were.

Now and then she directed her dance toward me, and I sensed the eyes of the piano player on me, studying me.

From the slight dilation of his pupils I was sure he was slightly hopped—enough to be a fatalist, not enough to convince himself he was God. I could sympathize with his mood. I caught his eye and smiled slowly.

His fingers stumbled briefly. The ash on his cigarette broke loose, dropping onto the piano keys, immediately to be trampled by his fingers in a sequence of off-beat cover-up chords.

The girl was down to her G string and net bra, toying with both as though she might take them off. She was built well—no doubt about that. Here and there a desultory clap coaxed her, exploding into the underlying tenseness, dying abruptly as though sound itself were something to fear.

Suddenly I became aware of someone towering behind me. An alcoholic breath engulfed me. The girl had seen whoever it was. She stood halfway through the curtain, her net bra dangling from her hand, her eyes round and terrified, staring over my head.

The piano had stopped in mid-note. The sounds of slow breath-

ing, of ponderous movement—the herd noises—were suspended, and there was only the hot animal breath of the man who towered behind me.

I could feel his mood. Hatred of me and what I represented. Contemptuous dismissal of the cost to his race if he touched me. A growing urge to crush me, feel my bones snap under his probing fingers.

An enormous hand clamped on to the edge of the bar, a wrist thick as my waist extending upward into a sleeve that could have fit over my shoulders. The veins stood out on the hand like water hose, the fingernails were ugly slabs. A gigantic bulk brushed against me. Weak with relief, I realized the man was sitting down on the stool to my left.

I looked up past the enormous shoulder to the face. The lips were leering. The bloodshot eyes focused on me.

An almost subaudible voice roared from the lips. "Who you gonna kill, Earthman? Who you gonna kill?" It was followed by a gust of gale-force laughter, accompanied by a stench that was bad breath magnified a thousand times.

I stared up into his eyes. His laughter ended abruptly. He licked his lips with a soft, plopping sound that seemed abnormally loud.

"I haven't made up my mind—yet," I said finally, my voice seeming to echo shrilly in the silence.

Abruptly the piano jarred to staccato life, the herd sounds resumed their normal tempo. The giant licked his lips, his tongue a huge slab of jaundiced meat.

I turned away. A new stripper had moved onto the stage. At least eleven feet high. And wide . . . Wide? I had never seen anything as wide. Each of her breasts must have weighed fifty pounds, her buttocks were pachydermic. I noticed just before I stopped watching her that her feet were relatively small and there was a certain grace to her dance.

After that I watched the piano player's hands move over the keyboard. And in my mind the memory of long forgotten audiences, my own piano, rose—and died. And in my ear the husky voice of the girl who was not Nalda whispered, "Hello again, honey."

I dropped off the stool to the floor and as we moved toward the booths in the back she took my hand. I felt its softness, its warmth. It wasn't much larger than mine. She was, I began to realize, very small for a giant, and very beautiful.

The music of the piano player followed us, and when we reached a booth she slid in without releasing my hand, and pulled me in beside her. Under the table she placed my hand against her thigh, holding it there. Her eyes were very bright. She slumped down un-

til she seemed little taller than I, and said, "Kiss me, darling. Please. Please kiss me."

"Sure," I murmured. "Sure."

Her lips were hot, feverish, hungry. Her body trembled under my touch. Her eyes remained open, too bright in the darkness. Her hands reached around me, dug in to my back, pulling me closer. Fear clothed her—fear, and something else. She moaned softly.

I pulled away from the kiss and her lips remained formed, her too bright eyes staring without seeing. Glistening tears had formed in them and as I watched they spilled out, forming rivulets on her cheeks.

With sudden irritation I pulled all the way away from her. Her eyes focused on her surroundings, then on my face, bewildered.

"You feel it too," I said harshly.

"I can't help it," she said. Her lips quivered. "I tried . . ." And then in a flat voice, "I suppose you will choose me to kill?"

Instead of answering I brought out my cigarettes, king size. She accepted one. It was small between her lips but not as small as it would have been between the lips of the piano player.

My lighter flared in the gloom. I lit our cigarettes, then held the flame near to the face of my wristwatch. It was ten forty-five. An hour and fifteen minutes to twelve.

"I don't want to die," she said, not looking at me.

"Few of us do," I said.

"I know it should be someone like me," she rushed on, unable to stop. "I'm no good. I *want* to die, sometimes. Sometimes . . . when I go to my room at the hotel, alone. My stinking room at the hotel—" Her voice was ragged.

She gripped my arm. "Look," she breathed. "You have how long? An hour? Maybe a little longer? Let's go to my room. I'll make you happy. I promise. We can set the alarm for five minutes of twelve so we don't forget. Then, when it's over . . ."

"Sure," I said tonelessly. "Then I could kill you."

"But then I would be willing—" She brought her hand up and clamped her teeth on her finger, her eyes wide.

"Sure you would," I said. "But do you think it's easy to kill someone? Let me tell you, sometimes it's easier to die. Let me tell you something. Remember when you were finishing your dance and that drunk stood behind me? I hoped he would kill me."

"But that would have meant a whole city!" she said. "The price for the death of an Executioner!"

"I know," I said. "Selfish of me. So instead I'll kill someone before midnight and I'll live to remember it for a long time."

"Wouldn't it be better to have some—pleasant—memories with it?" she stumbled. "Please. We can slip out of here . . ."

"No!" I said.

"Please!" She tried to pull me against her. "Please! And then you can kill me!"

"No!" I said, and shoved her away. She hung on, and I said, "God damn you, *no!*" I lifted my hand to hit her, to beat her . . . to strangle her.

Then, suddenly, she was in focus, and she was not Nalda. I pulled out a cigarette and my hand shook.

"Who is it?" I said. "Who are you trying to protect? The dwarf?"

Alarm, relief, then cunning played over her face.

"Yes," she whispered, "It was Shorty. I—I love him." She gripped my arm suddenly, words rushing out. "Please don't kill him. I—I'm going to have a baby and Shorty—he's going to marry me—"

"Nuts!" I said, and got up from the booth and walked stiffly back to the bar. My drink was still there. The bourbon burned my throat.

The fat girl had been replaced on the stage by a willowy redhead about eleven and a half feet tall who was down to her G string. I watched her a moment, and saw fear grow in her, her dance begin to fall apart.

I turned my eyes away toward the piano player, watched the fluid movement of his fingers.

Gradually I became aware of a change in the noises around me. There was a new note in the rumble of subdued talk. Here and there

a voice rose above the sound of the piano. The piano player played louder.

"Hey, Earthman!" someone shouted, and immediately someone else shouted, "Shut up, Joe!"

An argument began. Another.

I looked at my watch. It was eleven twenty. I wished I knew who I was going to kill.

The talking grew louder. Mob panic might make someone forget that killing me would result in a whole city being destroyed by a bomb from space. That was the Code and the Code had to stand or civilization would fall. Without the principal of impersonal, inflexible retaliation, the race hatreds of the thousands of diverging species of Man would flare up, eventually isolating the planet.

The willowy redhead danced uncertainly, disconcerted by the growing noise and shouting.

The music stopped in a crescendo of sound. The piano player sat looking down at the keys. He was probably thinking, "Should I get up and walk out casually, and hope the Earthman won't notice me?" He remained still for long moments. Then, without moving his body, he let his hands move over the keys. Lightly.

A sudden focus of motion halfway toward the front attracted my attention. I saw a huge figure of a man surge up over the bar, landing behind it. The dwarf on his short thick legs trotted toward the

man, his face angry. The man stepped up onto the stage, the ceiling clearing his head by inches.

"Quiet everybody!" he shouted, lifting his hands. "I've got something to say." The noise died down to a sporadic voice here and there. The dwarf came to a stop halfway up over the edge of the stage, then thoughtfully dropped back to the floor.

"My name is Joe," the man on the stage said, his voice deep and thunderous. "Listen to me. We all know the Code. Put yourself in the Earthman's position. He has a job to do. Somebody on this planet killed a little yellow-haired man from Ceti Three. For that, one of us here tonight must die, just as forty-nine other Endronians must die in other towns tonight. I'm asking for volunteers. I'm volunteering myself. There must be a few of you who don't care whether you live or die. Let the Earthman kill one of us who volunteer. What can be fairer than that?" He sought me out with his eyes and grinned at me sardonically.

A thick silence settled over the place. I saw his line of reasoning. He knew the Code better than most people, and thought he could defeat me. But his plan depended upon everyone in the place knowing what he was thinking, what he couldn't say. To compensate for that weakness there might be true volunteers and a final rush of stragglers to remain with the herd.

At a spot near where Joe had climbed over the bar four men stood up together and used their stools as steps to get onto the bar. They leaped from the bar to the stage, their combined tonnage causing the bar to shudder. These were the skills upon which the scheme hinged.

The piano player, in player-piano style, began the slow dirge of "Almost Persuaded." He got a few nervous laughs.

Toward the back end of the bar another gigantic figure went over the bar and moved toward the stage. Here was the first true volunteer. His eyes held fear and determination. His coarse skin glistened with nervous perspiration. His sobbing was the muted rumbling of subway trains. In his own mind he was going to certain death—but he was going.

Others were joining those on the stage. It kept on until there were over twenty volunteers for death. Then, abruptly, there were no more. The one called Joe pleaded with them, appealed to their nobler sentiments, even hinted at safety in numbers, repeating over and over that only *one* could die.

As I watched him, the minutes growing shorter, the backstage curtains parted. The blonde, diminutive among the giants around her, pushed to the front of the stage.

"All right!" she said brassily. "It can be me too, and if it is I want to die doing my strip." She turned

to the volunteers with a too bright smile and said, "Stand back, suckers, and give a girl some room."

"Almost Persuaded" altered its cadence under the shifting touch of the piano player's thick long fingers, developed a dance rhythm, lost its melody in transitional arpeggios, and became one of the standard dance numbers. The volunteers were jostling one another for position along the back of the stage. The girl's hand twined upward. Her hips began to sway. Her feet went into the first steps of her dance routine. I lifted my arm and glanced at my wristwatch.

It was ten minutes to twelve.

I glanced along the bar, at the many empty stools and the scattering of eighteen or twenty hold-outs. It looked like a Monday night when most of the regulars are home eating aspirin. I sat in the center of a twelve-stool vacancy. Those still at the bar mostly avoided looking in my direction.

How many of those who had not volunteered knew the Code well enough to know that it was preferred that no volunteers be killed—and had deliberately chosen the dangerous course? Those were the really brave ones. . . . I was glad I could not tell which were the brave ones.

One of those at the bar, a well-dressed kid with glasses and white hands, had his eyes on me, watching me with excitement, knowing

that time was short, not wanting to miss the first motion of my hand toward the proton gun at my belt. Not wanting to miss the fun.

"All right!" the giant called Joe shouted suddenly. "It's almost midnight! What are you waiting for, Earthman? Take your pick!"

The girl lost step for a second, then continued her dance, a smile frozen on her face.

I stood up on a rung of my stool, so that my elbow cleared the bar. Steadying myself with my left hand, I turned my face toward those on the stage as I slowly drew the gun from its holster.

Finally I stared at Shorty, the dwarf bartender, until I sensed from the corner of my eye a flash of hope on the girl's face. I'd been right about that, then—it wasn't Shorty she worried about.

I swung around, looked down the room at the piano player, holding the gun loosely. I heard the girl gasp, just barely. I gave her credit—she went on dancing.

I kept my eyes on the piano player, who seemed unaware of me. Kill him, and I'd hurt the girl more than if I killed *her*. Shoot off a finger, hurt him as much as she had hurt me . . . shoot off her ears, make her ugly, make him scorn her . . . kill Shorty, let her think she'd won—then shoot her too . . . kill Nalda, get it over with . . . kill . . .

I swung to Nalda . . . to the blonde who was not Nalda but

was as close to her as anyone I'd been able to find in this town. She was the one to kill. Killing the real Nalda had not been enough—I had to go on killing her wherever I could find her. That's why I was an Executioner.

I opened my mouth to call her and tell her what I was going to do, make her die just a little before I fired. My hand shook . . .

I closed my mouth and sat back on the stool for a moment. Then I stepped down to the floor, lifted the gun, aimed quickly, pressed the trigger. The proton charge, moving at two-thirds the speed of light, left the sterile scent of ozone.

The piano stopped in mid-chord, the blonde screamed. Down the bar, the sick, excitement-hungry kid with white hands toppled from his stool, a black hole in his chest. His glasses smashed when he hit the floor.

There was a growing rumble of sound behind me as I walked to the great swinging door. I didn't listen—I was trying to think why I'd done it.

It had suddenly come to me back there that you can't kill anybody more than once—that one girl is just one girl, with just one life.

And the stupid, unimportant little thing that made me know that was the fact that when I opened my mouth to talk to the blonde, I realized I didn't even know her name. . . .

SNAFU ON THE NEW TAOS

by MACK REYNOLDS

Being the pride of the space fleet, the New Taos naturally got the dirtiest duties. The crew didn't mind, though—until the big wheel's son came aboard. He was more dangerous than a Kraden battleship.

LIEUTENANT JOHNNY NORSEN, lanky executive officer of the scout cruiser *New Taos*, took up the sheaf of orders and stuffed them into his brief case.

"Sir," he said tentatively, "our crew has just returned from an eight-month cruise and is due a two-month leave. As you know, space cafard . . ."

Assistant Secretary of the Space Service, Warren Oliver, was in civilian garb. He smiled an open, politician's smile to charm away the *poof poof* negative shake of his plump hand.

"My dear Lieutenant, the *New Taos* has its unparalleled reputation. This six month cruise will be mere routine. And with two stops, the danger of cafard will certainly be minimized."

"Yes, sir," Norsen said coldly.

Warren Oliver said, "And, ah yes, one other thing, Lieutenant. My son has just graduated from Nuevo San Diego—top man in his

class, you know."

"Congratulations, sir."

"Of course, the boy, in view of the, ah, prominence of our family, would hardly expect to follow a fleet officer's career."

"Of course not." The lieutenant's angular face was expressionless.

The Assistant Secretary looked at him but decided there was nothing to which he could take exception. "However, regulations have it that before being assigned to a more responsible post, he must spend at least six months in space."

Lights were beginning to light.

The politician's smile was with them again. Warren Oliver finished up with, "I am sure that you will find Fredric a compatible officer and that he will be proud to serve on a ship of the *New Taos*' record."

When Lieutenant Johnny Norsen approached the *New Taos*, sitting on its tail in the space yard,



he found Trak-torpedoman Woodford on gangladder watch. The enlisted man saluted him sloppily in the best Space Service tradition.

"Skipper aboard, Woodford?" the lieutenant said, one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder.

"Yes, sir. Probably in the wardroom. Came aboard maybe fifteen minutes ago with that pal of his, Admiral Saunders. Hey, lieutenant, if you see that *makron* Petersen, kick his *bot* down here for me, will you? I'm all packed to go on my leave and he's supposed to relieve me."

"All leaves are cancelled, Woodford," Norsen said. "We're heading out toward Callisto as soon as the crew can be located."

"Another cruise! *Holy Jumping*

Wodo, lieutenant, I ain't had any leave yet. We just got back!"

"I haven't had any leave either," the other snapped, on his way up the gangladder.

Norsen made his way through narrow corridors to the tiny wardroom. Now that he was about to lay this situation in the hands of Commander Mike Gurloff, some of the cold anger went out of him. In a few moments he was going to have a demonstration of *real* wrath.

Burly Mike Gurloff was sitting with Bull Saunders, chief of their scouting fleet, at the wardroom table, small glasses of Martian *woji* before them. He looked up at his first officer, returned his salute with a flick of the hand and said, "What'd Oliver want, Mr. Norsen?"

We have another citation coming up?"

"We have a new cruise coming up, skipper."

Gurloff finished his drink, took up the *woji* bottle and replenished Saunders' glass before refilling his own. He reached behind him for another glass for Norsen, saying casually, "What's the use letting us know about it now? Be two or three months before . . ."

Johnny Norsen said bitterly, "The cruise is to start as soon as we can gather together the crew, skipper. We're to scout in the direction of Callisto for six months."

It was a long moment before Gurloff said with ominous quiet, "Scout for what in the direction of Callisto?"

"Just scout, sir. Evidently the Assistant Secretary wouldn't want to send us off in some direction where we might run into some of the Kraden fleet, not in view of the fact that his son is going to be aboard."

"You're not making much sense, are you Lieutenant?" Admiral Bull Saunders scowled at him. "You didn't pick up a touch of space cafard on this last trip, did you?"

Norsen knocked with the knuckle of his forefinger on the table top. "I don't think so, sir." And then to Mike Gurloff, "The new officer hasn't come aboard yet?"

"What in *kert* goes on here?" Mike Gurloff roared. "The more you talk the less sense you make. Start at the beginning!"

Norsen dropped into a chair, picked up the *woji* his skipper had poured for him and downed it in one stiff-wristed motion. "It seems that Fredric Oliver has just graduated from the academy. He needs six months in space before being assigned to some desk job. By coincidence, the *New Taos* is just heading out for a cruise which will last exactly six months. Cadet Oliver—pardon me, now it would be Ensign Oliver—has been assigned us."

Red began to creep up Mike Gurloff's bull neck. His head snapped around to his commanding officer. "Why the *New Taos*? We've just got in from a long cruise. My men need rest, they need some sunshine, companionship of women, food that doesn't come out of freeze lockers. They need to blow off steam in a *woji* bout. You can't send a crew out this soon—they'll be down with space cafard in two or three months."

Admiral Saunders' face was blank. "I don't know anything about this, Mike. It's as new to me as it is to you."

"Well, *do* something about it, Bull. You've got half a dozen ships here that haven't had a cruise for months. Let them have the assignment. . . . Scouting cruise to Callisto! We might as well spend six months scouting around Luna, right in our backyard."

Saunders was embarrassed. He made rings on the wardroom table with his *woji* glass. "It isn't hard

to figure out, Mike. Oliver wants his son to have the prestige of having served as an officer on the famous *New Taos*. It's your own fault you're the pride of the fleet—the only cruiser we have that's never had a demerit, that's consistently done the job laid out for it, that's tops in citations."

A voice from the door said stiffly, "Permission to enter, sir?"

The three of them looked up at the immaculately clad ensign standing ramrod-straight in the entrance to the wardroom.

"Ensign Fredric Oliver reporting, sir. Sorry, sir, I'm several minutes late. I found it necessary to give a brief dressing-down to the man on gangladder watch. Improperly uniformed and poorly instructed in saluting, sir. I'll make a full report later so that he may be disciplined."

"Oh, no," Mike Gurloff growled under his breath.

Bull Saunders grinned. "This'll teach you to be the pride of the fleet, Mike. Well, I'll be going. Happy cruise, gentlemen."

Mike Gurloff and Johnny Norsen glowered at him.

Ensign Fredric Oliver said snappily, "Thank you, sir!"

They were spaceborne before Commander Mike Gurloff was able to have a conference with his ship's officers whilst Ensign Oliver was on duty elsewhere.

They sat around the wardroom

table. Lieutenant Johnny Norsen, Lieutenant Dick Roland, ship's navigator, Ensign Mart Baker, engineer, and Doctor Thorndon.

Gurloff growled, "I'm not even going to point out that this hurts me worse than it does you. We've got it and we're going to have to work it out. Now, first of all, Doc, what's the danger of space cafard? The crew hasn't had sufficient leave, they're still groggy from the last cruise."

Doc Thorndon was red of cheek, thin of hair, a roly-poly man of over forty, which was *old* for the Space Service.

He said mildly, "Not as bad as you'd think, Mike." He was the only man aboard that called Gurloff by his first name. "Evidently Assistant Secretary Oliver is taking no chances on his son coming down with it. We're stopping twice, at Mars and Callisto, which will give us the chance to have a brief shore leave and to pick up new supplies of books, films, recordings, games. With a veteran crew like ours, the danger isn't in the extended period in space, as far as cafard is concerned."

The easy-going Dick Roland said, "I don't understand, Doc. Space cafard comes from monotony, boredom, claustrophobia, and time is the crucial element. Anybody can spend a few weeks in space—it's when it drags into months that space cafard comes."

Doc Thorndon said slowly, "It

can be more than that. For instance, Dick, who is your best friend?"

The navigator's eyes went from Mart Baker to Johnny Norsen, hesitated for a moment on Mike Gurloff's gruff face, came back to Doc Thorndon. He said, embarrassedly, "Why, I don't know. All you fellows, I suppose."

"All right, another question. Is there anyone among the crew you don't like, officer or enlisted man?"

"You know better than that, Doc. We're a team. We're the best team in the fleet."

Thorndon made a gesture with his hands, turning them palms upward. "There you have it. Any one of you could have answered the same. Any member of the crew would have. We're a team. Each man complements the other, supplements the other. We're strong in our closeness."

"What're you getting at, Doc?" Mart Baker said. He was a chubby, round-faced young man, a reflection of his regard for the dinner table. "What is this, a love fest?"

Thorndon said, "I'm wondering about the effect on our team of an unwanted addition whom we all have reason to resent. One who has no intention of ever becoming a member of the team because in six months he will be gone again."

Mike Gurloff's eyes sparkled. "If that *makron* gives me any trouble, I'll land on him like a battle cruiser on a meteorite."

Thorndon twisted his mouth ruefully. "Half an hour ago Ensign Oliver came into the ship's hospital and felt it necessary to make various remarks about the manner in which I conducted it. Among other things, he thought it was somewhat lacking in dignity—my lying on the bottom bunk, informally dressed, with the door open so that any passing enlisted man could have seen me."

Johnny Norsen erupted in laughter. "Holy *Wodo*, I wish I'd been there. Did you really read him off, Doc?"

Doc Thorndon looked at him strangely. "How could I, Johnny? He quoted me chapter and verse from Space Regulations to support everything he said. I'm not complaining. I think I have the capacity to be amused at the boy. However, there are members of the crew who may not react quite that way."

Thorndon looked around and shook his finger at them. "This cruise will last only six months and at the end of that time we'll be rid of Ensign Oliver. If we control ourselves, we'll wind up with the gratitude of the Assistant Secretary, which should pay dividends in the future. It certainly would be a change to have one of the brass hats on our side."

Commander Mike Gurloff growled something half audible.

Doc Thorndon shook his finger again. "Nobody is asking you to kiss anything, Mike. But we can't af-

ford to allow the boy to get our goats. If we do, we'll have space cafard to contend with on the trip and Warren Oliver to contend with when it's over."

Ensign Fredric Oliver came snappily to attention, flung a snappy salute to his commanding officer. "You wished to see me, sir?"

Mike Gurloff, in the tiny compartment that served as his office as well as his private quarters, closed his eyes in quick pain before looking up at the other. He said, "Mr. Oliver, you being assigned the *New Taos* came as a surprised to me. Actually, I have no need for another officer, nor are there adequate quarters. You will have to bunk in the ship's hospital with Doctor Thorndon."

"Yes, sir. And my duties, sir?"

"Lieutenant Norsen is my Exec, Lieutenant Roland, my navigator, and Ensign Mart Baker my engineer. The only post open to you is the steward department."

"Steward department!" The ensign was shocked.

Gurloff turned a cold eye to him. "Need I point out, Mr. Oliver, that an officer of the Space Services is always ready to assume any position on the ship to which he is assigned?"

"No, sir!"

"Very well. In the past the steward department was in charge of Chef Wallington. You will now take command."

"But, sir, surely the *New Taos* has an auto-chef. Just what would my duties be? I don't see . . ."

Mike Gurloff leaned back in his swivel chair. "Mr. Oliver, there are only two members of the steward department, Chef Wallington and Messman Spillane. As you say, everything is automatic, even to the serving of food. However, the same applies to every other department. Navigator Dick Roland has only once in his years of service ever actually had to do anything more than put punched cards in his IBM Navigator. Mr. Baker hasn't gotten his hands dirty in the engine room in the past four cruises. Ships today operate with hardly the touch of human hands. Our crew of thirty is unnecessarily large for the duties to be performed—until we go into action. Then, if anything, we are undermanned."

Some of the academy starch was gone out of Ensign Oliver. "Yes, sir," he said.

Chef Wallington cried bitterly, "Holy Wodo! What did you do now?"

"See here, Wallington, you're addressing a superior officer. I'll thank you to come to attention and address me properly."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. But what have you *done* . . . sir?"

"I have heard various complaints in the officer's mess about the lack of variety in our diet," Ensign Oliver informed him. "A competent

steward realizes the importance to ship's morale of good food. Consequently, I have taken measures to vary our diet, by crossing Venusian turtle soup and Ioian *bouillabaisse*. I trust that even Ensign Baker will be pleasantly surprised."

"Mart Baker? That chowhound? Sir, he wouldn't be happy if . . ."

"See here, Wallington, you're speaking disrespectfully about an officer of this ship. I'm going to have to report you again to Commander Gurloff."

"Yes, sir. But what's that smell coming from the auto-chef, sir? You didn't . . . you didn't cross any wires in there by chance did you, sir?"

"I just told you I made alterations to vary our diet."

Mike Gurloff eyed the green mess before him and said ominously, "Is this soup or dessert?"

"More like a stew, sir," Ensign Oliver said.

"It smells like a Mercurian *workhouse*. Has anybody tasted it?"

"I have," Mart Baker said. "I'll taste anything once."

"I'm sure you will, Mr. Baker. And . . .?"

"There are some things I won't taste twice."

"I see," Mike Gurloff said. "Mr. Oliver, I can assume then that the auto-chef is completely fouled up and that we will have to depend on manual preparation of our food?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. I'll do my best."

"Your best? Do you mean you'll attempt to cook?"

"Yes, sir. As a lad, sir, I used to belong to the Space Scouts. We used to . . ."

"You couldn't possibly be any worse than Chef Wallington. He hasn't boiled an egg in fifteen years. Is there anything else we can eat right now besides this bread?"

"We have some fruit thawing, sir."

The *New Taos* spent four days at Marsport. Long enough to give each member of the crew a couple of days in the *woji* mills, an opportunity to throw away some of his hard-earned credits at the three-dimensional roulette wheels, a chance even to acquire one of the more exotic diseases from a Martian lady-of-the-evening.

Mike Gurloff didn't stay longer than four days because time in port didn't count on the six-month cruise, and what most of the men wanted was home, not just a sprce and a chance at the fleshpots.

They hadn't been able to have the auto-chef repaired. The base at Mars was an inadequate one, and the model slightly antiquated. The only parts available had been for more recent equipment.

It was on their first day out of Mars, headed for Jupiter's satellite Callisto, that Lieutenant Johnny Norsen was pleasantly surprised by

the appetizing dish set before him.

"This smells good," he said. "Tastes good, too. Don't believe we ever had it when the auto-chef was doing the meals. What is it, Oliver?"

Ensign Fredric Oliver said modestly, "Something special I did up as a surprise."

"Good," Mart Baker muttered. "Time we had *something* that can be eaten." He lifted his own spoon toward his mouth.

"Mushrooms," Ensign Oliver explained. "I found them on Mars in almost any shady spot."

Mart Baker sputtered his food out over the table. Doc Thorndon leaped up and jumped for the mike of the inter-ship communicator.

He blared into it, "Stop eating! This is Thorndon. Any man who has tasted the Martian mushrooms, on the double to the ship's hospital."

Johnny Norsen, bugged his eyes down at his plate in horror, retched, then staggered to his feet and dashed for the door, following the ship's doctor in the direction of the hospital.

Ensign Oliver's eyes went from one of the remaining officers to the other. "What . . . what's the matter?"

Mike Gurloff rubbed his hand wearily over his eyes. "They won't die," he said. "Doc Thorndon'll get a temporary antidote into them soon enough. Partial paralysis until we can get serum back on Terra,

that's all it will be. Partial paralysis for everybody that even tasted them. . . . Mister Roland."

"Yes, sir," Dick Roland said.

"The hospital won't be large enough. You'd better take steps to clear out the number four compartment. Have bunks moved into it. Mr. Oliver, you go and find out from Doc Thorndon just how many you'll need."

Roland and Oliver left on the double.

Mart Baker said, "Will we be putting back to Terra, Skipper?"

Mike Gurloff glowered at him. "Mr. Baker," he said, "this trip is nearly half over. If we put back to Terra, it will mean that as soon as things are in order again we'll be sent out on another cruise. I doubt if it would be another six-month trip, and I can't think of anything I'd care for less than to have Mr. Oliver with us for, say, a full-year cruise."

Mart Baker shuddered. "Yes, sir."

"We'll finish this six-month stint of his if it means losing half the crew. Meanwhile, Mr. Baker, you have been promoted, or demoted, as the case may be, from the engine room to the galley. You're to take over the cooking. Chef Wallington doesn't know how to cook and I'll be a *makron* if I'm going to give Oliver another chance at poisoning us all."

Mart Baker said, "Skipper, good grub's been my hobby for years. I'll gladly take over the galley, but only

on the proviso that Oliver is booted out and I'm left in full charge."

"Reasonable enough. I'll make Ensign Oliver assistant to the navigator. I can't think of anything Lieutenant Roland needs less than a navigator's assistant."

The idea charmed Mart Baker. "An assistant to the navigator," he mused. "For forty years there hasn't been a navigator who's had anything to do. Punch the problem up on cards and slip them into the IBM Navigator and the answer is with you in two minutes."

"Nevertheless, every ship carries one," Gurloff growled, "and every cadet is taught navigation."

"Think of it, though," the round-faced Baker said admiringly. "The *New Taos* will be the only ship in the fleet with two navigators."

Even Gurloff had to grin.

Dick Roland said, "What in the name of *Wodo* are you doing, Oliver?"

Ensign Fredric Oliver looked up over his shoulder. "Chapter three, sir. Subheading, *Duties of a Junior Officer*."

Dick Roland said mildly, "It's been some years since I was at the academy. What does chapter three of Space Regulations have to do with you delving around in the insides of the IBM Navigator?"

"Paragraph thirteen, sir. *When an officer is assigned a position which he has not formerly held and with which he is not thoroughly*

familiar, he shall immediately endeavor to learn the workings of each piece of equipment it shall be necessary he operate and to . . ."

The ship's navigator said, "Hey, wait a minute. You mean you have that IBM spread all over the floor that way and you don't . . . Listen, do you mean you don't know how to get that back together again?"

Ensign Oliver came to his feet and looked down at the conglomeration of wires, relays, switches and conductors. He shook his head ruefully. "Sorry, sir. The models we're working with at Nuevo San Diego now are somewhat different. That's why I felt it necessary to familiarize myself with this equipment in line with paragraph thirteen. But I'm afraid I'm going to have to turn it all over to you, sir. I can't make heads or tails of it."

Dick Roland went to his desk and began searching through it. "Where in the *kert* is that slide rule," he muttered.

Ensign Oliver was taken aback. "Slide rule, Lieutenant? What's that got to do with reassembling this automatic navigator?"

Roland said sadly, "For the balance of this cruise, Oliver, the *New Taos* is going to be navigated pencil and slide rule in hand. You see, when I was at the academy, we had still another model. I've never had one of these things down in my life. As a minor example, it has seventy-five miles of wire in it—

I wouldn't know where ten feet of it went."

It was while they were refueling at Callisto that Mike Gurloff came into the ship's hospital and sank wearily into the room's sole chair. Doc Thorndon was characteristically sprawled in the lower bunk, reading. He put a finger in the book to mark his place and looked up at the other questioningly. The rest of the ship's officers were ashore.

Gurloff could read the book's title from where he sat. "John Donne," he said disinterestedly. "Never heard of him. Worth reading?"

"I think so. Beautifully written. The work is so old as to be almost prehistoric."

"One of those ancient things of yours, eh. Can't get myself interested in them." He came to the point. "Look, Doc, are we going to be able to get back to Terra without cafard hitting the crew? This Oliver kid has driven half of them to the edge of frenzy."

"I don't know." Thorndon pursed his lips. "Have you thought of making him morale officer?"

"Morale officer?"

"On some of the big battle wagons where the crews run into the thousands they have an officer in charge of ship's morale. He arranges entertainments, sports events, dramatic presentations—that sort of thing."

"What I should do is throw him in irons," Gurloff growled.

"And antagonize his father. Don't be ridiculous. Don't you see, Mike? If you give him the job of supervising morale, he'll ease up. He'll see the crew is tight and do the best he can to relax them."

"I don't know," Gurloff growled. "He'd foul it up some way."

"Well," Thorndon said, "You've got to assign him to something. Dick Roland certainly doesn't want him around the navigation room any more and Mart Baker won't let him in the galley."

Gurloff gave up. "I'll inform him as soon as he gets back to the ship. By the way, they didn't have the necessary serum for the ten boys in the hospital and we didn't have any luck on getting repairs on either the navigator or the auto-chef."

Doc Thorndon liked his stomach almost as much as did Mart Baker. He said, cryptically, "It tolls for me."

The *New Taos* was only two days out of Callisto, but at least they were headed toward home.

Commander Mike Gurloff pushed himself back slightly from the wardroom table and said, "Mr. Baker, I congratulate you. It only goes to show that a hobby can really pay off. I think your meals are almost as good as those turned out by the auto-chef."

"Thanks, skipper," Mart Baker said modestly.

Gurloff turned to Dick Roland. "And how does navigating go, Mr. Roland?"

Dick shrugged good naturedly. "It's probably fine practice for me. Takes up all my time, of course, but Doc says that's one way of warding off cafard."

"Certainly lots of work helps," Doc Thorndon said.

The Commander turned his eyes to Ensign Fredric Oliver. "And how does the morale officer progress?"

Ensign Oliver reported stiffly. "Took my duties immediately to heart, sir—while we were still on Callisto. Thought a ship's mascot was in order, sir, in the tradition of the ship's cats of the old days."

Gurloff yawned. "That sounds good. Ship's mascot, eh? Give the men something to spend their time on." He scratched himself. "I must have picked up some sort of itch on Callisto."

"Nothing that would cause an itch on Callisto, Mike," Doc Thorndon said. "Must be your imagination."

Mike Gurloff reached suddenly with the fingers of his right hand, caught something. "Here's the little *makron* that was making me scratch. Looks something like a flea."

Doc Thorndon's face lost its rosi-ness. "Let's go to the hospital, Mike," he said. "I want to check you."

Mystified, Commander Gurloff came to his feet without protest and led the way.

The ship's doctor looked over his shoulder at Oliver as he followed. "That pet, that mascot, Mr. Oliver—what did it look like? It couldn't have been carrying fleas, could it?"

"Look like? Why quite a bit like a terran kitten. That's what gave me the idea. What's a flea, Doctor?"

But the doctor was gone.

Five minutes later the voice of Commander Gurloff boomed over the ship's intercommunication system. "Hear this. Wherever that Callistan crystal rat is on the ship, kill it immediately and flush it overboard. All hands will then don space suits. The ship is to be decontaminated in exactly five minutes. Following this, all hands not hospitalized will report to the hospital to be checked for Callistan Plague."

Two minutes later, the commander's voice rapped again. "Mr. Roland will take immediate measures to clear additional emergency hospital space in the number four compartment."

Two minutes later, that was amended. "In view of Mr. Roland's illness, Mr. Baker will make the arrangements for the additional beds in compartment four."

Commander Mike Gurloff's face was a pasty green as he looked up from his bunk at Doctor Thorndon.

"Don't pull any punches with me, Doc. We've been shipmates for a long time and you know I can take it. Tell me the worst."

Thorndon grinned down at him. "What a baby," he chuckled. "The bigger they are, the louder the thump."

Mike Gurloff growled, "What the *kert* are you mumbling about?"

"You. Nothing's the matter with you beyond one terrible case of nausea which becomes intensified when you stand erect or exert yourself. You're no better and no worse off than most of the rest of the crew. By the time we reach Terra you'll have recovered."

"Reach Terra!" Gurloff sputtered. "How'll we ever reach Terra with only five men in the ship's company still on their feet?"

Thorndon grinned at him. "At least we're not going to have to worry about space cafard. The men in bed with mushroom poisoning or plague are too sick to take it, and we five still on our feet will be too busy taking care of the ship and of you invalids to have time for a luxury like cafard."

The commander snorted. "Well, send Mr. Baker to me. I'm going to have to turn command of the *New Taos* over to him."

The doctor shook his head. "Not Baker."

"Not Baker? Well, who? He's the only officer left standing except . . . oh, no, are you insane, Doc?"

Doc Thorndon said definitely, "We need Baker to cook for us all, to keep the engineroom supervised and to navigate. I'll be needed full time to take care of the sick. Oliver

had enough training as a cadet to stand the bridge watches. You know there's nothing important he'll have to do—Baker will be handling all the tricky stuff. You can't get around it—Oliver's your man."

"Oh, *no!* Not in command of the *New Taos!*"

"Look, Mike, there's another angle. It means that our Ensign Oliver will get a citation, possibly a Service Medal for bringing the ship in. It'll please his old man to the skies. At least we'll get something out of this grief. Maybe even we won't be assigned next time to a lousy cruise of the type we're famous for."

Mike Gurloff surrendered. "Send him to me," he growled. "Let's get it over quick—this is the hardest thing I've done since I was given command."

No one had ever accused the crew of the *New Taos* of not doing a job up brown once they had taken it on. And this job was no exception, even if homicidal urges lurked in every heart.

After the landing at New Albuquerque and the complete physical recovery of all sick-bay cases, all hands gathered for a lavish banquet in the honor of Fredric Oliver.

On the rostrum were seated Commander Gurloff and his officers, together with special guests Assistant Secretary of the Space Service Warren Oliver, and Admiral Bull Saunders. Above the rostrum was a black and gold banner reading: *He*

Brought Us Back—Thanks Freddy Oliver!

They wine and they dine and they listened to a speech by Commander Mike Gurloff, in which he revealed that when all his officers except Oliver and Baker were hospitalized, and all but three of the crewmen landed on the sick list, Ensign Oliver was given command and brought the *New Taos* back to base.

The talk was received with great cheering and clapping of hands from the crew. They appreciated heroism when they saw it—and the skipper had proved himself tonight.

Followed a shorter speech by Admiral Saunders and an awarding of the Service Medal and then a lengthy one by Warren Oliver himself. He revealed that in spite of the protests he knew he was going to hear, that he must announce that the services of Ensign, now Lieutenant, Oliver, would no longer be available to the *New Taos*. He must forsake, in the line of duty, his close companions of the space ways and take up the less exciting perhaps, but more demanding duties of his father's assistant.

Cheers were heard through the hall—rousing, prolonged—which brought tears to the eyes of the Assistant Secretary.

He shook his head to Mike Gurloff and Admiral Bull Saunders. "Pure unselfishness," he said. "They're willing to give him up, knowing his career will be that

much greater right here on Terra."

"Yeah," Mike Gurloff growled. "Good set of men, I've got. Somehow or other they'll manage to do without Mr. Oliver."

The following day, Mike Gurloff addressed his crew as they stood to attention beside the docked *New Taos*.

"I know you boys are anxious to get off to your homes, your wives or your girls . . ." he grinned at them ". . . or possibly your favorite *woji* joint. However, I've just received word from Admiral Saunders that he's to address us as a unit before any leaves are granted. I don't know what it is, boys, but I can imagine as well as the rest of you. It's undoubtedly some sort of unit citation."

"Here he comes now, skipper," Lieutenant Norsen whispered.

Commander Mike Gurloff about-faced and snapped a salute to the approaching Admiral Bull Saunders.

Bull Saunders' face was dark. He answered the salute and turned and faced the crew of the *New Taos*.

"It's my painful duty to announce that the *New Taos*, clean-slated for more than ten years, has earned its first ship's demerit." He looked down at the paper in his hand, scowled at it again. "There was nothing I could do about it. Regulations are regulations."

They stood shocked rigidly stiff as he read.

The first was a mumble of stan-

dardized routine. Finally his voice cleared and he read, ". . . my duty to report the following:

"When a member of the ship's company through negligence blew out the ship's auto-chef, no disciplinary action was taken against him. On another occasion when a member of the ship's company poisoned several members of the crew, the matter was not even entered in the ship's log. Again when a member of the ship's company brought aboard a dangerous animal leading to the hospitalization of various officers and enlisted men, he was not disciplined. Still again when a member of the ship's company fouled the IBM navigator he was not reprimanded even to the extent of being confined to quarters. Obviously, discipline on the *New Taos* is lax and contrary to Space Service Regulations. Signed, Lieutenant Fredric Oliver."

Admiral Bull Saunders looked up, disappointment in the man confronting him, in his face. "You have any answers to these charges, Commander Gurloff?"

There was silence.

Admiral Saunders looked to the others. "Has any officer or enlisted man any answer to these charges?"

There was sagging of shoulders, agony in faces, but not a word spoken.

Admiral Saunders said flatly. "Frankly, it is my opinion that Lieutenant Oliver handled himself in an exemplary manner. You will note that he hasn't named the individuals involved in this series of breaches of discipline. Most certainly an act of charity on his part."

Mike Gurloff managed to sputter, huff, turn red and growl, but he finally came out with, "Yes, sir. I noticed that Lieutenant Oliver didn't mention who it was that made these various *snafus*. All I can say, sir, is that he certainly takes after his father."

Admiral Saunders accepted and returned Commander Gurloff's salute, and then marched away.

The officers and crew of the *New Taos* looked after him.

"It tolls for us," Doctor Thorndon said cryptically.

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BEFORE THE TALENT DIES

by HENRY SLESAR

Harkavy was clearly a dangerous man, and the medical authorities were pleased with their decision to kill him.

Humanely, they permitted him a last, innocent, fling.

Which may—or may not—have been a mistake. . . .

IT WAS A PRISON.

It had carpeted floors and Queen Anne furniture. There was a high wall of leather-bound books, a humidor of fine cigars on the desk, a high-fidelity phonograph with a library of excellent recordings.

But Wayne Harkavy knew it was a prison. There were bars outside the narrow, heavy-draped windows, blurring the view of Pennsylvania Avenue and the Capitol dome. Outside the room's only door stood a civilian guard with a shoulder holster. Harkavy had been a well-privileged prisoner for six days. He had had few visitors, and most of them the medical officers assigned to perform the examinations. His needs were swiftly attended to; every meal he took was splendidly prepared, and expertly served inside the room.

He leaned back now and pushed aside the plate on the serving trolley. Then he poured himself a second cup of coffee, and sipped it thoughtfully.

Harkavy was a young man, with smooth blond hair and a sensitive, long-featured face. His skin was unlined and pale, and he didn't give the impression of physical strength. He was someone easy to ignore on a street or in a crowd, unless you happened to notice his eyes. The pupils were so dark and enlarged that he appeared to have no eyes at all, but almond-shaped, cavernous pits of strangely compelling darkness.

He was lonely, he was unhappy, and he was bored.

Yet even now, Harkavy didn't regret the decision that had brought him to Washington, D. C. Even now, when he sensed that the official attitude towards him was merely polite and slightly amused interest—perhaps even a touch of fear. The Medical Commission which had undertaken to investigate his extraordinary claims had gone about their examinations briskly and meticulously. But he had probed into the minds behind the gray hairs and gleaming spectacles and serene

brows, and he knew that in the beginning they regarded him as nothing more than a somewhat gifted lunatic. He wondered how much they believed him now. Enough, at least, to have learned to shield some of their thoughts.

He smiled to himself, not humorously, and picked up the folded newspaper lying beside him.

The newspapers had been his greatest ally. Their lurid feature stories concerning his telepathic powers contained untruths and exaggerations, but they had served the purpose. They had made him a public figure, someone to be reckoned with. They had made it mandatory for some sort of official attention to be paid to his demands.

Harkavy unfolded the paper. His photograph was on the bottom of Page One, and the caption read: "COMMISSION REPORT DUE ON HARKAVY TOMORROW." The likeness was good; his eyes burned out of the newsprint. The story beneath the photo was less faithful. It hinted that the government was considering Harkavy with a view to national defense; that his sensational talents were being studied and catalogued for some vague military or espionage purposes.

He snorted, and dropped the paper to the floor.

When he heard the bolt sliding on the door, he turned to face his visitor. It was Dr. Esmond, the short, smooth-cheeked medical man who had been conducting his ex-

aminations. He was grinning, and Harkavy gently probed into his mind for the emotion that was pleasing him so much. He pulled away in disgust when he determined what it was.

"Well!" Esmond said, pulling up a chair. "Didn't mean to interrupt you at your meal, Mr. Harkavy."

"That's quite all right. I've finished. Perhaps you'd like a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," Esmond said quickly. "But I have good news for you this time."

"Oh? On my proposal?"

"I'm afraid I can't speak on that subject, Mr. Harkavy. As I've told you, the right people know all about the purpose of your visit, and keep daily contact with the reports of the Medical Commission. But whether or not they'll agree to your proposals about this eugenic foundation—well, that's a matter of state. I'm only a poor physician." He laughed.

"I see. Then how much longer must I stay here?"

"That's the good news I was talking about. We've completed our study, and you're free to leave anytime you wish. Tonight, if you like."

Harkavy sighed.

"I thought you'd be pleased," Esmond said. "You've been something of a prisoner here, but I trust it wasn't too unpleasant. I'm sure you'll be hearing in a matter of a few weeks—"

Harkavy was startled. The

smooth rhythm of the doctor's emotional pulse had suddenly broken as he spoke the last sentence. Lightly, Harkavy probed at Esmond's mind, but it seemed well-sealed against intrusion.

"Of course, no one doubts your ability as a telepath any longer, Mr. Harkavy. Your demonstrations have been most convincing. We're not equipped to explain them any more than you have been yourself, but I think you'd find our brain-wave studies interesting. The output of electrical energy is astonishing; they would indicate that you have many times the active brain cell capacity of the, er, normal mind."

Harkavy folded his hands in his lap. "I'm not interested in diagnosis, Doctor. I'm interested in application."

"Exactly so, exactly so," Esmond beamed. "Well, you've probably read the articles about making you a spy, that sort of thing." He chuckled.

"I'm not interested in such things. There's more than mind-reading involved, Doctor. There's—understanding. If every human in the world had this talent of mine, the world might change overnight. Change for the better. That's what I've been trying to tell you. That's what I've been trying to tell the newspapers, too, but they preferred to feature the more sensational aspects."

"You can't really blame them,"

Esmond said tolerantly. "Especially this transformation business. There's precedent for telepathy, Mr. Harkavy. But this other claim of yours, this power to change form—that's rather incredible."

"I can do it," Harkavy said tonelessly. "It's merely another aspect of the talent. It's purely an hypnotic effect. By intensifying the strength of my probe, I can convince you or any other human being that I'm someone else. In every detail, every physical feature."

"If you would only permit a demonstration—"

"I've explained that—I realize that if I demonstrate such a power, I would make myself a kind of monster in the eyes of the world . . . I would become something loathsome and non-human, something not to be trusted, something to be destroyed like a mythological demon—"

Again, a throb of ugly emotion came from the placid-faced medical man, and Harkavy looked at him sharply.

"You exaggerate," Esmond said smoothly. "You underestimate the intelligence of modern man. We're no longer stumbling in medieval darkness, Mr. Harkavy—we are ready to accept far more than you give us credit for." He laughed pleasantly, and stroked his chin.

Harkavy said: "I'd like to believe it."

He picked up his coffee, sipped it.

Esmond watched him, and smiled.

Once more, Harkavy caught the erratic jump in the pulsations of the doctor's mind. He probed again, but Esmond's thoughts were still barred to him.

"And what about my proposals?" Harkavy said. "Are they taking them seriously?"

"It's really not my province—"

"Don't tell me that, Doctor. This is your decision. If your Commission decides against my recommendation, it will not be forwarded to a proper Government agency. I can only hope your judgement will be based on the evidence, and not influenced by the opinions of certain pompous Senator friends of yours looking for publicity."

Esmond flushed. "That's unjustified. But you'll have to understand that your request is an unusual one. It might result in much criticism if adopted without the most careful study—"

"Study?" Harkavy slammed his cup down, his face showing anger for the first time. "What more study do you need? I'm not asking you for anything, Doctor. I'm offering you something! I'm offering continuation of a talent, a vital talent, a talent that may change this cockeyed world someday, if put to the right use."

His face changed, and the anger in his voice was replaced with earnestness.

"Look, I realize I'm some kind of

freak, Dr. Esmond. Just like my father was. We were both born with this twist in us, and it made us different. But we can't afford to let the talent die, just because I will some day. Some kind of eugenic foundation *must* be formed to carry it on, to nurture it, to—" He stopped.

"It's a laudable idea," Esmond smiled. "Believe me, Mr. Harkavy, I'm sure you mean well. But exactly how practical this all is—" He spread his hands.

Harkavy stood up.

"I'd like to leave now."

"Very well. But you're sure you won't satisfy my curiosity about this transformation business? Surely you don't think *I'll* regard you as a monster."

The blond man looked at the doctor, and there was a new interest in his cavernous eyes.

"Perhaps I will," he said. "But in order to perform for you, doctor, I'll need your complete cooperation."

"Of course!"

"Then you must release the tight rein you have on your mind."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you do. You've built a barrier against me, ever since you learned my telepathic talents were real. But if you wish to see me transformed, you must relinquish it."

Esmond looked doubtful, but his curiosity was too great. "All right," he said. "I'll do as you say."

Harkavy probed—gently, then more forcibly. Slowly, the patterns of thought in the physician's brain were exposed.

Death . . . said Esmond's mind . . . Five or six days, aluminate metathycoline, undetectable . . . never notice it . . . coffee . . . inexorable process . . . superb plan, neatly executed . . . death by natural causes, five to six days . . . finis would-be superman . . . for the good of the world . . . death . . . good job . . . congratulations . . .

Harkavy shut his eyes.

"What is it?" Esmond said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing . . ."

Suspicious? said Esmond's mind. Impossible . . . no way of detecting . . . tasteless . . . result heart disease . . . irreversible . . . no antidote . . . Harkavy . . . Harkavy . . . five to six days . . . death . . .

Harkavy opened his eyes, and his mouth was grim. Then he let the total impact of his probe take possession of Esmond's mind, until the physician cried out in shock and pain.

"Oh, God!" he said. "God, no!"

Harkavy smiled, with Esmond's mouth.

"You're *me*!" Shakily, the physician got to his feet. "You're me, Harkavy! Don't do this. Don't do it!"

"Don't do what?" Harkavy said, in Esmond's voice. "I mean you no harm, Doctor. I'm merely demon-

strating, as you asked me to. Now see yourself as others see you."

"It's horrible! Change back, Harkavy, for God's sake, change back!"

"I could cause you a great deal of trouble, couldn't I, Doctor? I could kill you, for instance, and go on living your life. However, that may not be very long . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Harkavy said wearily. "Nothing at all." He probed again towards the short man with the sweating, smooth-shaven cheeks, breaking the hypnotic hold.

"Satisfied?" he said.

Esmond fell heavily into the chair, his trembling hands in his lap. "Yes," he said. "Now please go, Mr. Harkavy. Please go!"

The blond man looked at him for a moment, and then went to the door.

The guard outside tipped his hat. "Goodbye, Mr. Harkavy."

"Yes," Harkavy said. "Goodbye."

When he reached the street, he was surprised to find the April air warm, even sultry, as if Summer had come upon the city suddenly during his six-day confinement.

There was a small patch of greenery a few blocks away. Harkavy went to it, and sat down on a bench to let the sun warm his face and hands. He began to think.

The message he had read in Esmond's mind was clear. He had been officially executed. In five to six days, he would be dead. . . . Five to six days!

He must live them well.

Then Harkavy knew what he had to do. He was so convinced of its rightness that he spoke the words aloud.

"I must have a child," he said.

LAURA

She woke up with a headache, and the blurred memory of an unpleasant dream. She sat on the edge of the bed and put her hands to her throbbing temples, debating whether she should ask her husband for an empirin. Then she remembered that Gil wasn't in the opposite bed:

She went into the kitchen of her four-room apartment and made coffee. From the window, she saw that the weather had turned fair and warmer, but the sunshine failed to improve her spirits. The argument with Gil last night still rankled within her.

At ten-thirty, the doorbell sounded. She went to answer it.

"Hello, Laura."

"Gil! What are *you* doing home? I thought you were on the plane to Denver?"

"I called it off." Her husband came inside, avoiding her eyes.

"That's funny. You acted as if it was the most important business deal of the century, yesterday."

He smiled wryly. "I guess I was wrong."

"I was just having some breakfast," Laura said. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That would be fine."

In the kitchen, Laura watched him from the corner of her eyes. He seemed oddly shy, or maybe the word was chastened. She felt sorry for him suddenly. She touched his hand tenderly and said, "Gil, I'm sorry. About those things I said last night."

His face was blank.

"I just couldn't help myself," Laura said. "We've only been married six months, Gil. Yet you've been away so often, I feel as if we don't even know each other yet. And when you told me about this Denver trip today—well, I suppose I just lost my head."

"Sure." He sipped his coffee.

"I always thought that a husband and wife—well, that after a while they wouldn't *need* words for them to know how they felt. I guess that's what's wrong with us, Gil. We just don't *know* each other well enough . . ."

"I guess you're right," Gil said. He looked up suddenly and caught her eyes. They held her strangely, with a power she had never noticed before. "Sometimes, people need more than words, Laura. Do you know anything about this fellow, Harkavy? He claims to be a telepath, that kind of thing."

"Oh, yes, I remember. That mind-reader—"

"No!" Gil spoke sharply. "It's not that crude, Laura. Harkavy is—well, he thinks the talent has a deeper meaning than just mind-

reading. He thinks it's a way for people to understand each other as they never did before . . ."

Laura laughed. "That doesn't sound like you, Gil."

Her husband put down the cup, and it rattled against the saucer. "Just one of my deeper moods, Laura. I won't let it happen again."

"No, Gil." She squeezed his hand. "Let it happen. I like you this way."

"Look," he said. "It's really a beautiful day. What say we have ourselves an outing? Walk around the park, maybe, or go sit by the river and watch the ships pass. Then we can just talk. Would you like that, Laura?"

"I'd love it!"

They kissed at the doorway before they went out, and she had the flushed, spirited look of a schoolgirl.

It was a magnificent day for an outing. They walked slowly through the sunlit park for two hours, and stopped for a late lunch at an outdoor restaurant. Then they walked westwards across the city streets towards the river, and sat on a bench and talked until the sun descended spectacularly into the water. Then they had a romantic dinner in a candlelit restaurant downtown.

By the time they returned to their east side apartment, it was after ten-thirty.

They sat on the sofa and sipped brandy from highball glasses. Gil

put his arm around her, and she leaned against his shoulder.

After a while, he reached up and turned off the end-table lamp. She whispered: "I love you, Gil . . ."

He put down his glass and kissed her. Then he took her in his arms, and picked her up from the sofa. She felt small and frail, and laughed sleepily, nuzzling her head against his chest.

He carried her to the bedroom door, kicked it open with his foot, and took her inside.

When he put her gently on the bed, the telephone rang.

"Damn!" Laura whispered.

"Ignore it," Gil said. "Just let it ring."

"Oh, Gil, I can't—"

"Please, Laura."

"You know how it'll bother me," Laura said, and reached over to pick up the receiver.

"Hello?"

The voice said: "Laura? You weren't sleeping, were you?"

"No. Who's this?"

"What do you mean, who's this? It's Gil, of course. I'm calling from the Statler, in Denver. Listen, honey, that damn fight we had keeps bothering me—"

She stared at the receiver, and then turned a wild eye to the man standing beside her.

"Hello?" The receiver quivered.

"Hey, are you listening?"

"What is it?" the man by her bed said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Who's calling?"

She handed him the instrument.

"Hello, Laura?" the voice said. "You're not still *sore*, are you? The least you can do is *talk* to me, for God's sake; these calls cost money—"

The man hung up.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She stared at him, without words.

"I met him at the airport," the man said. "That's how I knew about you. I had my reasons for this, believe me."

She began to scream, and Harvavy sent out a probe from his mind to hers, to stop the terror that was gripping her brain. He held her mind as a doctor holds a struggling patient, until it became quiescent.

Then he turned and left.

BETTINA

The soft lights of the cafeteria were kind to the small diamond that flashed on Peggy's finger. Bettina bent over to examine the stone, her pretty red mouth an "O", her eyes shining with either awe or envy or both.

Peggy waggled her fingers and said: "Of course, we probably won't get married until Fall. Ralph's got his pre-med to finish, and we want to make sure that there's some money in the bank in case of—" She blushed.

Bettina, her slightly stringy red hair falling over her valentine-shaped face, said: "I'm really happy for you, Peggy. Honest I am."

"Thanks. But if *you* were a little smarter about men, Bettina, you'd be wearing a diamond, too. Ernie's diamond. If you only didn't waste so much time moonin' over Rex Corrigan and those other movie heroes of yours. Honest to God, for a girl *your* age—"

"Please!" Bettina said, her face a study in patient suffering. "I'm sure you'll be very happy with Ralph. But I'm going to wait until I meet somebody I can be happy with. It's as simple as that."

"And what about Ernie? He's been hanging around you now for two years—"

"Ernie's a nice boy," Bettina said.

"But he's no Rex Corrigan, is that it? Or haven't you been able to make up his mind for him?"

"Peggy—"

"Hey," her friend said. "Did you notice? He's gone."

"Who is?"

"That blond guy who was sitting at the next table. Didn't you see him? He was looking you over, but good. Looked pretty nice, too. No Rex Corrigan either, but kinda cute."

"Now you stop it, Peggy!"

"Okay, honey, okay. I'm just trying to get you to be realistic, that's all. There's a hell of a lot more Ernies than Rexes in the world, that's all I'm trying to say. But suit yourself." She shrugged and dug into her purse for her lipstick. . . .

Bettina walked towards home alone, enjoying the unusual warmth

of the April air, feeling as if summer had come to the city. She even strolled three blocks out of her way to pass the Cameo Theatre, where Rex Corrigan's newest movie was being offered to public view. She had seen the film twice, and was almost tempted to see it again.

She stood in front of the six-foot cardboard display that featured the star in a characteristically dashing pose. His dark narrow eyes seemed to burn into her own, his handsome, humorous mouth was turned up in an understanding smile that might have been meant just for her.

Bettina sighed.

"I beg your pardon—"

She barely turned her head to face the man who had spoken to her. "Yes?"

"Have you seen this picture?"

The question was a leading one, and Bettina's automatic masher-defense was quickly organized. She turned and started to walk off. Sure enough, he followed her.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. If you'll just let me explain—"

"Say, listen," Bettina said, and turned.

When she saw the man's face, its effect, Medusa-like, was to freeze solid her expression of indignation and surprise.

"My name's Corrigan," the man smiled—a smile on a handsome, humorous mouth, with an understanding that was unquestionably meant only for her. "Rex Corrigan.

That's why I was curious about your reaction to the movie."

"Rex Corrigan," Bettina repeated.

"Yes. Listen, this is rather difficult to explain. But perhaps we can go somewhere and talk. It's really very important to me."

"Talk?" Bettina said stupidly, her mouth open.

"Yes. There are some questions I'd like to ask you, as part of a personal survey I'm making. I guess you could call it that. Would you mind very much?"

"Oh, no. No, I wouldn't mind."

"Fine," Rex Corrigan grinned.

She didn't recall how they finally arrived at the corner bar, didn't remember the contact of her high heels upon the pavement, or what the waiter looked like, or even the name of the dimly lit cocktail lounge they were in.

"I feel like I'm dreaming," Bettina said. "I know that sounds corny, Mr. Corrigan, but that's just how I feel."

"You're just being flattering," he said. "But as you can see, I'm no phantom. I'm just another guy." He smiled engagingly.

"But you're not. Oh, but you're not! You're *Rex Corrigan*. Why, Peggy and I were just *talking* about you. I was just telling her how much I—" She stopped.

"I know this is presumptuous of me," the man said. "As a matter of fact, it was my agent's idea. He felt that I was getting too far removed from the public, that I

should go out and talk to them myself. That's what I've been doing for the past few days. But I must admit—this is the most pleasant part of the assignment yet—"

He reached across the table and held her hand. "You're a lovely girl, Bettina. Did you know that?"

"How did you know my name?"

"Oh, didn't you mention it?"

"I guess I did. It's Bettina Anderson."

"Pretty name. Do you live in the city, Bettina?"

"Oh, yes. Down on 12th Street. It's a sort of a rooming house, but very nice."

"Can we go down there and talk? I'd really like to know you better, Bettina. Of course, if you don't think it would be proper—"

"Oh, no!" Bettina said quickly. "It's perfectly all right, Mr. Corrigan. I'd love to have you!"

"Good. But you'll have to forget about that Mister Corrigan stuff. My name's Rex."

"Rex," Bettina breathed. "I'll be ready to go in a minute. I just want to go and freshen up—"

She was gone ten minutes. When she returned, her red mouth was redder, her curly red hair more neatly arranged, her cheeks glowing under the retouched makeup.

Bettina's apartment on 12th Street was very much like Bettina. It was small, sweetly attractive, and perhaps too overdecorated.

She found it incredible that Rex Corrigan himself was seated on her

sofa, thanking her cordially for the glass of warm wine she offered him, patting the plump cushion beside him and inviting her to sit beside him.

She accepted the invitation, and didn't even murmur when Corrigan's arm slipped easily around her shoulder.

"Of course I meet a lot of women," he said, in answer to her question. "Perhaps that's just the trouble. Or maybe I meet too many women who've forgotten who and what they really are. But you're someone different, Bettina. Different for me, anyway. You're someone I can find very appealing . . ."

"Oh, Rex!" Bettina said. "You can't really mean that."

"Of course I mean it." His hand moved across the back of her dress. She hardly felt the light pressure of his fingers as he undid the top button.

Corrigan moved his other hand to encircle her waist.

"Rex . . ." Bettina breathed.

He kissed her, and she appeared to swoon.

The sound that came at the door wasn't a knock—it was an assault. Bettina jumped, and looked at Corrigan in surprise. The hammering noise continued, and then the unlocked door was flung open, to slam against the wall with an alarming explosion of wood on plaster.

"What the hell!" Corrigan said.

"Ernie!" Bettina cried.

The assailant of the door was a

young man with a round, bespectacled face and unruly red hair. The face had a quality of homely innocence that even the scowl couldn't conceal. It was a black scowl, a murderous scowl, and his head was lowered like an enraged bull.

"For heaven's sake, Ernie," Bettina said primly. "What are you doing here? I *told* you I was busy tonight. I called you *especially* to tell you I was having a guest."

"Some guest!" Ernie spluttered.

Corrigan said: "Now look, friend—"

"You shut up!" The redhead swallowed hard and turned to the girl. "Who do you think you are? Betty Grable or something?"

"Ernie!"

"Now wait a minute," Corrigan said. "When did Bettina call you?"

"About an hour ago. Said she was coming here with Rex Corrigan. I thought she was off her nut, only now I see what's going on. You thought because you were a big-shot movie star—"

"An hour ago?" Corrigan frowned and looked at Bettina. "I thought you went to powder your nose?"

"I just had to call Ernie," she sniffed. "I wanted him to know about it."

"So that was the idea." Corrigan smiled wryly. "All right," he said. "I'm glad I could help, Bettina. In any way."

He got up and went to the door.

"And don't come back!" Ernie yelled after him. "Don't come

bothering my girl! You hear that, big shot?"

"I heard you," Wayne Harkavy said. Gently, he probed at Bettina's mind, and was sadly amused by the emotion he read there.

DELLA

When her father began rattling his newspaper and clearing his throat, Della sighed wearily, knowing what was coming next. It was the Senator's preamble to a pronouncement, and he would expect her to agree with him. She looked towards the mahogany doors of the library and thought about making a tactful escape, but the Senator was already turning around in the high leather chair near the fireplace and saying:

"Of all the damnable things. You been reading about this Harkavy character, Della?"

"Yes, father."

"A madman, no doubt of it."

"I suppose so," Della said. She ran her fingers over the blonde streak in her black hair. The fingers were thin and fragile, like fine porcelain. They were like the rest of Della; beautiful and breakable.

"And the worst part is," the Senator said, "the press is taking him seriously!"

"Yes, father."

"Say." He stood up and came to her side. "Shouldn't you be getting dressed? Or aren't you going to that party with Freddy?"

"I'm trying to make up my mind," Della said.

"Want to see the paper?"

"No, thanks."

"You ought to read it. A lot of crazy things are happening in this world, and you just don't seem to care."

She smiled up at him, but not in the way a daughter should.

"The new rebels, father?"

"All right, the new rebels." His broad face flushed. "I know what you're thinking, Della. You think I'm nothing but a political posturer. But you're wrong. I'm serious about this new rebels business. I think it's a great threat to this country. I'll keep on fighting 'em as long as I've got a place to stand on Capitol Hill."

"Is Harkavy one of your new rebels?"

"Maybe he is! How should I know? As I pointed out in my remarks to the press, he's got crackpot ideas, and we don't have time these days for crackpot ideas. There are all kinds of rebels around, and we've got to flush 'em out. Whatever disguise they're wearing."

She took the paper from his hand. There was a photo of Wayne Harkavy on the second page, his cavernous eyes staring out from the paper.

"And what kind of rebel is he?" she said.

"I don't know. But just read his statements about this telepathy business. Wants to start some kind of government foundation, continua-

tion of his powers, something like that. Wants to make the whole damn country telepathic, so we can all go around reading each other's minds."

"Sounds like fun." She laughed.

"It's all nonsense. Oh, not that he can't do what he claims. That seems to be well-documented. Our friend Esmond headed up a medical commission to examine him; they say he's genuine enough. But when a man with a power like that gets ideas, he's dangerous! Listen, what's more important than the privacy of the mind? How would you like somebody sneaking around in your thoughts?"

Della considered it. "Not much," she said. She got up from the chair and smoothed her skirt over her flat hips. "Maybe I will go to the party," she said. "I feel stifled—"

"Splendid," the Senator said. "I was hoping you would, Della. Do you a world of good. Now go call Freddy before he gets himself another girl."

"All right, father."

Della went to the door and opened it. Sherry, her father's new wife, was just coming in, her mink coat swirling around her young body.

"Oh, hello," she said airily, with a toss of her blonde curls. "Going out, Della? How nice. . . . Your father inside?"

"I'm here," the Senator said.

"Have a good time, dear." Sherry planted a sisterly kiss on her cheek.

She was two years younger than Della.

"I will," Della said.

She went up the graceful marble stairway to the second floor. In her bedroom, Della sat at the dressing table and stared at her white, thin-featured face in the mirror for a long time. Then she caught her breath, and went to the window to let in some of the balmy April air. She breathed deeply.

After a while, she lifted the white telephone by her bedside and dialed Freddy's number.

"Hello, Freddy? This is Della. Look, I've got this awful headache, and I don't think I can make the party tonight. Do you mind very much?"

She listened patiently to his protests.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Call me tomorrow, if you can. I'm going to try and sleep it off."

When she hung up, she went to her closet, and changed her dress for a black turtle-neck sweater and plaid skirt. Then she sat at the dressing table and put light dabs of color on her pale face.

Her father and Sherry were still behind the closed doors of the library, so she had no trouble in making the front door without being seen. She walked briskly to the garage in back of the house, and got into the low-slung Italian-built roadster that had been last year's birthday gift.

She drove at a moderate speed until she reached the city limits. She drove faster after that, until the growl of the foreign car became a constant roar. She only slowed down when the red glow of a neon sign appeared in the distance. The sign said: GENTLEMAN JACK'S.

The main room of the roadhouse was cluttered with chrome-plated tables, with soft lights set into the centers. The bar was like the prow of an ocean liner. There weren't many patrons.

She went up to the bar and sat on a stool. The barman was at the other end, pouring a drink for a blond man with dark eyes and a long, sensitive face.

When it was her turn she said, "Hello, Gus. Is Jack around?"

"I saw him upstairs an hour ago, Miss. You want I should call upstairs?"

"In a minute. Give me a drink first. Martini."

She drank her drink, conscious of the blond man's eyes on her. She ignored him, busy with her own thoughts. When she was finished, she nodded at the bartender.

"All right. Maybe you better call him. Tell him Miss D. is here."

"Okay, Miss." He picked up one of the two bar telephones and spoke quietly. He put it down with a sigh. "Sorry, Miss. Mr. Collins says he's busy."

"What does that mean?"

"Search me, Miss."

She glared at him, and hopped

off the stool. She threaded her way past the tables to the front, not noticing that the blond man was gone.

There was a man sitting in her car.

"Jack!"

"Hello, baby."

"But I just had the bartender call you. He said you were busy."

He grinned at her. His face would have been handsome, but too many of the bones showed beneath the thin, dry skin. "I just didn't want to advertise," he said. "We don't need publicity, do we?"

"No, I guess not." She climbed into the driver's seat.

"Let's go to my place," Jack said. "You know the way."

She nodded, and turned the ignition key. They drove for ten minutes, in silence. When they pulled up at the small, ranch-style house off the main road, he had some trouble locating his key, so she used her own, the little gold key he had made for her.

"That's the first time, baby," he grinned. "First time you ever used that key. Had a change of heart?"

"Let's go inside."

They sat on the curved sofa in front of the false fireplace, and Jack made them both a drink. When he sat down, he slipped his arm around her shoulder, and she pushed it away.

"Don't—"

"What's the matter? I thought maybe we were getting someplace."

"You thought wrong," Della said

tightly. "I just wanted to ask you a favor, Jack."

"Sure, anything."

"I want you to help me locate somebody, somebody important—"

"I don't get you."

"There's a man named Harkavy, maybe you've read about him. He came to Washington a few days ago. He's a sort of mind-reader."

Jack looked at her with narrowed eyes. "So what? You know this guy?"

"No. But I want to, Jack. I want to a lot."

"Why?"

"I can't explain. Maybe I don't know why myself. But I have to meet him—"

He looked at her.

"I'm Harkavy," he said.

"What?"

"I'm not Jack, Della. I'm Wayne Harkavy. I've made you think I'm Jack, because I thought I saw something in your mind—"

"What are you talking about?"

He probed out and enveloped her mind, gently at first, and then with graduated force. The shock of it jolted her and she screamed, shutting her eyes and putting her balled fists to her face.

"Oh, my God!" she said, staring at the blond man.

"I'm sorry," Harkavy said. "I had to do it this way, Della. I didn't want to trick you, but I have so little time."

"You were at the bar—"

"That's right. I left when I realized that Jack wouldn't be coming

downstairs, that he was tired of trying to break down your resistance. I saw that in the bartender's thoughts when he picked up the telephone."

She smiled bitterly. "I thought it would happen. But I don't care."

"You know," Harkavy said, "your father doesn't approve of me. And I suddenly got the idea I'd like to see if his daughter agreed with him. . . . But I wonder why you wanted to meet me."

"I don't know." She looked into the fireplace. "I just had to find you, talk to you. I've been reading about you, saw your picture in the paper."

"And what do you think about what you've read?"

"I don't know what to think. It bothered me, all those things you said. I wanted to find out more, find out all about you, what made you the way you are—"

"I don't know myself," Harkavy said. "I just don't know, Della." He touched her hand. This time, she didn't resist.

"You're so strange," she said. "Your eyes . . ."

"I'm a freak."

"No!"

He pulled her to him, and she didn't resist.

"You're reading my mind," she said.

"Yes," Harkavy answered, gently.

ESMOND

Dr. Esmond stepped out of the taxi in front of Jefferson Hospital,

and his tip to the driver was generous. He was feeling particularly well today. The weather was balmy, the cherry blossoms were burdening the Washington trees, and his good friend the Senator had honored him by letting him be among the first to know about the Senator's new grandchild.

The hospital staff recognized him as he entered the front lobby, and bowed him into the elevator that led to the maternity floor. The Senator himself was the first to greet him as he stepped off the car.

"Nice of you to come," the Senator said. "I believe you've met my son-in-law, Freddy Holmes."

"How do you do," Esmond beamed, pumping the hand of the vacuous-faced young man by the Senator's side. "And congratulations. Understand you have a fine, bouncing baby boy."

Freddy giggled. "I dunno. I haven't seen him bounce yet, but I guess he's okay."

Esmond clucked. "And how is Mrs. Holmes?"

"She's fine," the Senator said gruffly. "Della's fine. A little depressed, maybe, but that's only natural. You know how it is—"

"Of course, exactly so."

"They'll be showing the infants in about five minutes," the Senator said. "We can go have a look at him. He's the image of Della."

"Oh, I dunno," Freddy said, looking injured. "I sort of thought he looked like me, a little."

The Senator laughed, and pounded his son-in-law's back. "Let's say he favors you both. Now if you'll excuse us for a moment, Freddy . . . I want to speak to Dr. Esmond. Alone."

Freddy got the hint, slowly. "Oh, certainly."

When he was gone, the Senator growled: "Nincompoop!"

Esmond said, "Something you wanted to tell me, Senator?"

"Nothing very important. It's this Harkavy business. Since his death last year, there've been some questions concerning that proposition of his. The issue is still unresolved, and it's leading to criticism. I think the best thing we can do is for the Senate to hold a brief, formal hearing on the matter, get a report from the Medical Commission, and close the books for good."

"Very well," Esmond sighed. "If you think that's necessary, Senator. You'll have my full cooperation."

"Good!" The Senator lost his business-like manner and became the proud grandparent again. "Now I think we ought to take a look at the new baby. You go first, doctor; it's right down that way. I want to stop in and say hello to Della."

Esmond went down the hall in the direction of the Senator's gesture. There was a clean sheet of glass facing the hospital nursery, and a nurse wheeled a crib with leather sides to the glass, and then reached in to remove the bundle it held.

The tiny face that appeared at the window had a startling effect upon the doctor. He didn't know why; the features of infants always struck him as gross distortions of humanity. But this face was different, with its black, cavernous, almost adult eyes, its long features, its straggly blond hair.

He stared at it, and saw no resemblance to the sandy-haired, gray-eyed, vacuous-faced Freddy, or to the black-haired, fragile Della. There was a resemblance to another face he knew; a face he saw in brief, unpleasant dreams.

He looked away, troubled by his irrational thoughts, and was glad to see the Senator coming his way.

"Well, Doctor? What do you think of my grandson?"

"Lovely child," Esmond said feebly. "Very lovely."

The Senator put his face to the glass and made silly noises at the infant.

"I think he looks like Della, don't you? Thank God for that, anyway. Couldn't stand another Freddy around the house."

"What?" Esmond turned around.

"I said he looks like Della. Same blue eyes, same dark hair. What do you think?"

Esmond looked again, and there was ice in his spine. The baby's hair was curly and black. Its features were round. Its eyes were somewhat small and brilliantly blue, and before they closed in sleep, they seemed infinitely wise. . . .

*The Staaids materialized on the White House lawn, and
brought promises of wealth and friendship for Earth.
Then, abruptly, they disappeared. It was a catastrophe.
And the only explanation appeared to be . . .*

written in the stars

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

THE ABRUPT DEPARTURE OF THE *Staaids* had left everyone bewildered, including the President of the United States himself. One minute they had been standing on the White House lawn with Professor Gromley, chatting affably through their portable translator and watching the stars come out; the next minute, for no apparent reason, they had folded their gossamer tents like a band of affronted Arabs and had filed stiffly through the glistening doorway of their transmitter. That their decision was final became obvious when they pulled the transmitter into the warp after them, leaving nothing on the White House lawn to show that an extraterrestrial expedition had ever camped there, except a medley of strange footprints in the snow, a forlorn tent peg, and a crestfallen expression on Professor Gromley's countenance.

The President of the United

States, quite understandably, was disappointed as well as bewildered. After all, if the *Staaids* had stayed and dispensed all of the wondrous technological items they claimed to have, his would have been a distinction not to be sneezed at for generations to come. The next election would have been in the bag, and 1973, the very first year of his tenure, would have commanded a place in future schoolbooks as large and as imposing as that occupied by such die-hard dates as 1492, 1620, and 1945.

But the *Staaids* hadn't stayed, and all the President had to look forward to now was his impending cross-examination of Professor Gromley. He sat grimly behind his austere, flat-topped desk, waiting impatiently for the anthropologist to be shown into his office. Never had a president been in more dire need of a patsy, and never had one been more readily available.

Professor Gromley's black-rimmed spectacles gave him an owl look as he stepped diffidently into the presidential presence. "You sent for me, Mr. President?"

"I most certainly did," said the President, honing each word carefully. "Can you think of a more pertinent person for whom I could have sent under the circumstances?"

"No sir, I'm afraid I can't."

"Well then, without further digression, I suggest that you tell me what you said out there on the lawn to offend our guests and send them hieing back to wherever they came from."

"That would be Delta Sagittarii 23, sir," Professor Gromley said. "But they didn't leave because of anything I said."

"Now that is a remarkable statement!" said the Chief Executive acidly. "We made you our representative because of your esteemed anthropological background, threw the *Staaids* in your lap, so to speak, hoping that because of the mark you'd made for yourself in your field, you'd be the one human least likely to tread on their cultural corns. In other words, for the twelve hours of their stay on Earth, you were the *only* person who spoke to them directly. And yet you stand there and tell me that they didn't leave because of anything *you* said. Why, then, did they leave?"

With his black-rimmed spectacles glinting in the radiance of the

presidential desk lamp, Professor Gromley looked more than ever like an owl—and an acutely embarrassed one. "Mr. President," he said hesitantly, "are you familiar with the constellation 'Orion'?"

"Certainly I'm familiar with Orion. I believe, however, that we are now discussing Delta Sagittarii 23."

"Yes, sir," Professor Gromley said miserably. "But you see, sir, from the perspective of Delta Sagittarii 23, Orion isn't Orion at all. That is, the arrangement of the stars that comprise the constellation is very different when seen from their planet."

"All of which," the Chief Executive said drily, "is extremely interesting astronomical data. I presume it has some tenuous connection with the present topic of conversation—viz., in case you've forgotten, the reason underlying the *Staaids'* departure."

"What I'm trying to bring out, sir," Professor Gromley continued somewhat desperately, "is the unfortunate fact that the *Staaids*, never having been on Earth before, could not possibly have anticipated the star pattern that climbed into our eastern sky tonight while we were talking out there on the lawn. If they had anticipated it, they wouldn't have touched this planet with a ten trillion foot pole."

"I'm listening."

Professor Gromley stood up a little straighter before the presiden-

tial desk and a certain classroom didacticism crept into his next words:

"Before demonstrating exactly why the *Staaids* did leave, Mr. President, I'd like to fill you in on certain pertinent facts which I learned about them during the time I spent in their company.

"First, while they are certainly sophisticated as regards technological matters, they are not in the least sophisticated as regards other matters.

"Second, their present morality bears a strong resemblance to our own morality, and was strongly influenced by elements closely paralleling the Judaeo-Christian elements that molded our own Western attitude towards sex. In other words, they are simultaneously fascinated and repelled by any reference to the act of reproduction.

"Third, their language is symbolic, dating way back to their primitive ancestors, and so simplified that even a non-specialist like myself was able to obtain a fair understanding of its basic structure during the twelve hours I spent in conversation with them.

"Fourth, the particular group that visited our planet, were missionaries. . . .

"And now, Mr. President, if you will have the kindness to have a blackboard brought in, I will demonstrate why our erstwhile benefactors departed."

It was on the tip of the Presi-

dent's tongue to remind Professor Gromley that this was not a classroom and that he, the President of the United States, was not to be regarded as a somewhat retarded pupil. But an aura of dignity had lately settled on Professor Gromley's stooped shoulders—an owlish dignity, to be sure, but a dignity nonetheless. The President sighed . . .

After the blackboard had been brought in, Professor Gromley assumed a classroom stance before it and picked up a piece of chalk.

"The only characteristic of the *Staaid* language that applies to the present problem," he said, "is the manner in which they form their verbs. This is accomplished by combining two nouns. In representing their symbols, I'm going to use stars—for a reason that will become apparent to you presently. Actually the *Staaids* employ many subtle variations but the resultant pattern of the symbol, in this context, is the same."

He raised the piece of chalk, touched it to the blackboard. "This—

*
*

is the *Staaid* symbol for "sapling," and this—

*
*
*

is the *Staaid* symbol for 'tree.' Now by combining the two, thusly—

*
*
*
*
*

we obtain the verb 'grow.' Do I make myself clear, Mr. President?"

"I'm still listening," the President said.

"One more example. This—

*

is the symbol for 'bird,' and this—

*
* *
*

is the symbol for 'air.' Combining the two, we get—

*

*

for the verb 'fly.' "

Professor Gromley cleared his throat. "We are now ready for the particular symbol combination that brought about the *Staaids'* departure," he said. "This—

* * *
*
*

is the symbol for 'man,' and this—

* * *

* *

is the symbol for woman. Putting them together, we get—

* * *

* * *
*
*

* *

Now do you understand why they left, Mr. President?"

It was obvious from the ensuing silence and from the blank expression on the presidential countenance that as yet no bell had sounded in the presidential brain. Professor Gromley wiped his forehead.

"Let's resort to an analogy," he said. "Suppose *we* transmitted *ourselves* to Delta Sagittarii 23, established contact with the local natives, and promised them the moon and the stars as a prelude to proselytizing them. Then suppose, on the very evening of the day of our arrival, we looked up into their sky and saw a gigantic four-letter word

rising in the east. What would we do?"

"Good Lord!" The President's face had turned the color of his crimson blotting pad. "But can't we explain—make an official apology? Something?"

Professor Gromley shook his

head. "Even assuming we could contact them, the only way we could bring them back would be by removing the source of the affront to their mores. . . . We can wash four-letter words off lavatory walls, Mr. President, but we can't wash them out of the sky."

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NOW LET US SLEEP

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

*The Yahoos were filthy, smelly, stupid aborigines—
in a starship civilization they had about as much place
as a dodo or a Tasmanian. . . .*

A PINK-SKINNED YOUNG CADET ran past Harper, laughing and shouting and firing his stungun. The wind veered about, throwing the thick scent of the Yahoos into the faces of the men, who whooped loudly to show their revulsion.

"I got three!" the chicken cadet yelped at Harper. "Did you see me pop those two together? Boy, what a stink they have!"

Harper looked at the sweating kid, muttered, "You don't smell so sweet yourself," but the cadet didn't wait to hear. All the men were running now, running in a ragged semi-circle with the intention of driving the Yahoos before them, to hold them at bay at the foot of the gaunt cliff a quarter-mile off.

The Yahoos loped awkwardly over the rough terrain, moaning and grunting grotesquely, their naked bodies bent low. A few hun-

dred feet ahead one of them stumbled and fell, his arms and legs flying out as he hit the ground, twitched, and lay still.

A bald-headed passenger laughed triumphantly, paused to kick the Yahoo, and trotted on. Harper kneeled beside the fallen Primitive, felt for a pulse in the hairy wrist. It seemed slow and feeble, but then, no one actually knew what the normal pulse-beat should be. And—except for Harper—no one seemed to give a damn.

Maybe it was because he was the grandson of Barret Harper, the great naturalist—back on Earth, of course. It seemed as if man could be fond of nature only on the planet of man's origin, whose ways he knew so well. Elsewhere, it was too strange and alien—you subdued it, or you adjusted to it, or you were perhaps even content with it. But

you almost never *cared* about the flora or fauna of the new planets. No one had the feeling for living things that an earth-born had.

The men were shouting more loudly now, but Harper didn't lift his head to see why. He put his hand to the shaggy grey chest. The heart was still beating, but very slowly and irregularly. Someone stood beside him.

"He'll come out of it in an hour or so," the voice of the purser said. "Come on—you'll miss all the fun—you should see how they act when they're cornered! They kick out and throw sand and—" he laughed at the thought—"they weep great big tears, and go, 'Oof! Oof!'"

Harper said, "An ordinary man *would* come out of it in an hour or so. But I think their metabolism is different . . . Look at all the bones lying around."

The purser spat. "Well, don't that prove they're not human, when they won't even bury their dead? . . . Oh, oh!—look at that!" He swore.

Harper got to his feet. Cries of dismay and disappointment went up from the men.

"What's wrong?" Harper asked.

The purser pointed. The men had stopped running, were gathering together and gesturing. "Who's the damn fool who planned this drive?" the purser asked, angrily. "He picked the wrong cliff! The damned Yahoos *nest* in that one! Look at them

climb, will you—" He took aim, fired the stungun. A figure scrabbling up the side of the rock threw up its arms and fell, bounding from rock to rock until it hit the ground. "That one will never come out of it!" the purser said, with satisfaction.

But this was the last casualty. The other Yahoos made their way to safety in the caves and crevices. No one followed them. In those narrow, stinking confines a Yahoo was as good as a man, there was no room to aim a stungun, and the Yahoos had rocks and clubs and their own sharp teeth. The men began straggling back.

"This one a she?" The purser pushed at the body with his foot, let it fall back with an annoyed grunt as soon as he determined its sex. "There'll be Hell to pay in the hold if there's more than two convicts to a she." He shook his head and swore.

Two lighters came skimming down from the big ship to load up.

"Coming back to the launch?" the purser asked. He had a red shiny face. Harper had always thought him a rather decent fellow—before. The purser had no way of knowing what was in Harper's mind; he smiled at him and said, "We might as well get on back, the fun's over now."

Harper came to a sudden decision. "What're the chances of my taking a souvenir back with me? This big fellow, here, for example?"

The purser seemed doubtful. "Well, I dunno, Mr. Harper. We're only supposed to take females aboard, and unload *them* as soon as the convicts are finished with their fun." He leered. Harper, suppressing a strong urge to hit him right in the middle of his apple-red face, put his hand in his pocket. The purser understood, looked away as Harper slipped a bill into the breast pocket of his uniform.

"I guess it can be arranged. See, the Commissioner-General on Sclopé III wants one for his private zoo. Tell you what: We'll take one for him and one for you—I'll tell the supercargo it's a spare. But if one croaks, the C-G has to get the other. Okay?"

At Harper's nod the purser took a tag out of his pocket, tied it around the Yahoo's wrist, waved his cap to the lighter as it came near. "Although why anybody'd *want* one of these beats me," he said, cheerfully. "They're dirtier than animals. I mean, a pig or a horse'll use the same corner of the enclosure, but these things'll dirty anywhere. Still, if you *want* one—" He shrugged.

As soon as the lighter had picked up the limp form (the pulse was still fluttering feebly) Harper and the purser went back to the passenger launch. As they made a swift ascent to the big ship the purser gestured to the two lighters. "That's going to be a mighty slow trip *those* two craft will make back up," he remarked.

Harper innocently asked why. The purser chuckled. The coxswain laughed.

"The freight-crewmembers want to make their points before the convicts. *That's* why."

The chicken cadet, his face flushed a deeper pink than usual, tried to sound knowing. "How about that, purser? Is it pretty good stuff?"

The other passengers wiped their perspiring faces, leaned forward eagerly. The purser said. "Well, rank has its privileges, but that's one I figure I can do without."

His listeners guffawed, but more than one looked down towards the lighters and then avoided other eyes when he looked back again.

Barnum's Planet (named, as was the custom then, after the skipper who'd first sighted it) was a total waste, economically speaking. It was almost all water and the water supported only a few repulsive-looking species of no discernible value. The only sizable piece of land—known, inevitably, as Barnumland, since no one else coveted the honor—was gaunt and bleak, devoid alike of useful minerals or arable soil. Its ecology seemed dependent on a sort of fly: A creature rather like a lizard ate the flies and the Yahoos ate the lizards. If something died at sea and washed ashore, the Yahoos ate that, too. What the flies ate no one knew,

but their larvae ate the Yahoos, dead.

They were small, hairy, stunted creatures whose speech—if speech it was—seemed confined to moans and clicks and grunts. They wore no clothing, made no artifacts, did not know the use of fire. Taken away captive, they soon languished and died. Of all the Primitives discovered by man, they were the most primitive. They might have been left alone on their useless planet to kill lizards with tree branches forever—except for one thing.

Barnum's Planet lay equidistant between Coulter's System and the Selopés, and it was a long, long voyage either way. Passengers grew restless, crews grew mutinous, convicts rebellious. Gradually the practice developed of stopping on Barnum's Planet "to let off steam"—archaic expression, but although the nature of the machinery man used had changed since it was coined, man's nature hadn't.

And, of course, no one *owned* Barnum's Planet, so no one cared what happened there.

Which was just too bad for the Yahoos.

It took some time for Harper to settle the paperwork concerning his "souvenir," but finally he was given a baggage check for "One Yahoo, male, live," and hurried down to the freight deck. He hoped it would be still alive.

Pandemonium met his ears as he stepped out of the elevator. A rhyth-

mical chanting shout came from the convict hold. "Hear that?" one of the duty officers asked him, taking the cargo chit. Harper asked what the men were yelling. "I wouldn't care to use the words," the officer said. He was a paunchy, gray-haired man, one who probably loved to tell his grandchildren about his "adventures." This was one he wouldn't tell them.

"I don't like this part of the detail," the officer went on. "Never did, never will. Those creatures *seem human* to me—stupid as they are. And if they're *not* human," he asked, "then how can we sink low enough to bring their females up for the convicts?"

The lighters grated on the landing. The noise must have penetrated to the convict hold, because all semblance of words vanished from the shouting. It became a mad cry, louder and louder.

"Here's your pet," the gray-haired officer said. "Still out, I see . . . I'll let you have a baggage-carrier. Just give it to a steward when you're done with it." He had to raise his voice to be heard over the frenzied howling from the hold.

The Ship's Surgeon was out having tea at the Captain's Table. The duty medical officer was annoyed. "What, another one? We're not veterinarians, you know . . . Well, wheel him in. My intern is working on the other one . . . *whew!*" He held his nose and hastily left.

The intern, a pale young man with close-cropped dark hair, looked up from the pressure-spray he had just used to give an injection to the specimen Yahoo selected for the Commissioner-General of Selopé III. He smiled faintly.

"Junior will have company, I see . . . Any others?"

Harper shook his head. The intern went on, "This should be interesting. The young one seems to be in shock. I gave him two cc's of anthidar sulfate, and I see I'd better do the same for yours. Then . . . Well, I guess there's still nothing like serum albumen, is there? But you'd better help me strap them down. If they come to, there's a cell back aft we can put them in, until I can get some cages rigged up." He shot the stimulant into the flaccid arm of Harper's Yahoo.

"Whoever named these beasties knew his Swift," the young medico said. "You ever read that old book, 'Gulliver's Travels'?"

Harper nodded.

"Old Swift went mad, didn't he? He hated humanity, they all seemed like Yahoos to him . . . In a way I don't blame him. I think that's why everybody despises these Primitives: They seem like caricatures of ourselves. Personally, I look forward to finding out a lot about them, their metabolism and so on . . . What's *your* interest?"

He asked the question casually, but shot a keen look as he did so.

Harper shrugged. "I hardly know, exactly. It's not a scientific one, because I'm a businessman." He hesitated. "You ever hear or read about the Tasmanians?"

The intern shook his head. He thrust a needle into a vein in the younger Yahoo's arm, prepared to let the serum flow in. "If they lived on Earth, I wouldn't know. Never was there. I'm a third generation Coulterboy, myself."

Harper said, "Tasmania is an island south of Australia. The natives were the most primitive people known on Earth. They were almost all wiped out by the settlers, but one of them succeeded in moving the survivors to a smaller island. And then a curious thing happened."

Looking up from the older Primitive, the intern asked what that was.

"The Tasmanians—the few that were left—decided that they'd had it. They refused to breed. And in a few more years they were all dead . . . I read about them when I was just a kid. Somehow, it moved me very much. Things like that *did*—the dodo, the great auk, the quagga, the Tasmanians. I've never been able to get it out of my mind. When I began hearing about the Yahoos, it seemed to me that they were like the old Tasmanians. Only there are no settlers on Barnumland."

The intern nodded. "But that won't help our hairy friends here a

hell of a lot. Of course no one knows how many of them there are—or ever were. But I've been comparing the figures in the log as to how many females are caught and taken aboard." He looked directly at Harper. "And on every trip there are less by far."

Harper bowed his head. He nodded. The intern's voice went on: "The thing is, Barnum's Planet is no one's responsibility. If the Yahoos could be used for labor, they'd be exploited according to a careful system. But as it is, no one cares. If half of them die from being stung, no one cares. If the lighter crews don't bother to actually land the females—if any of the wretched creatures are still *alive* when the convicts are done—but just dump them out from twenty feet up, why, again: no one cares. Mr. Harper?"

Their eyes met. Harper said, "Yes?"

"Don't misunderstand me . . . I've got a career here. I'm not jeopardizing it to save the poor Yahoos—but if *you* are interested—if you think you've got any influence—and if you want to try to do anything—" He paused. "Why, now is the time to start. Because after another few stop-overs there aren't going to be any Yahoos. No more than there are any Tasmanians."

Selopé III was called "The Autumn Planet" by the poets. At least, the P.R. picture-tapes always re-

ferred to it as "Selopé III, The Autumn Planet of the poets," but no one knew who the poets were. It was true that the Commission Territory, at least, did have the climate of an almost-perpetual early New England November. Barnumland had been dry and warm. The Commissioner-General put the two Yahoos in a heated cage as large as the room Harper occupied at his company's Bachelor Executive Quarters.

"Here, boy," the C-G said, holding out a piece of fruit. He made a chirping noise. The two Yahoos huddled together in a far corner.

"They don't seem very bright," he said, sadly. "All my *other* animals eat out of my hand." He was very proud of his private zoo, the only one in the Territory. On Sundays he allowed the public to visit it.

Sighing, Harper repeated that the Yahoos were Primitives, not animals. But, seeing the C-G was still doubtful, he changed his tactics. He told the C-G about the great zoos on Earth, where the animals went loose in large enclosures rather than being caged up. The C-G nodded thoughtfully. Harper told him of the English dukes who—generation after ducal generation—preserved the last herd of wild White Cattle in a park on their estate.

The C-G stroked his chin. "Yes, yes," he said. "I see your point," he said. He sighed gustily. "Can't be done," he said.

"But why not, sir?" Harper cried.

It was simple. "No money. Who's to pay? The Exchequer-Commissioner is weeping blood trying to get the Budget through Council. If he adds a penny more— No, young fellow. I'll do what I can: I'll feed these two, here. But that's all I can do."

Trying to pull all the strings he could reach, Harper approached the Executive-Fiscal and the Procurator-General, the President-in-Council, the Territorial Advocate, the Chairman of the Board of Travel. But no one could do anything. Barnum's Planet, it was carefully explained to him, remained No Man's Land only because no man presumed to give any orders concerning it. If any government did, this would be a Presumption of Authority. And then every other government would feel obliged to deny that presumption and issue a claim of its own.

There was a peace on now—a rather tense, uneasy one. And it wasn't going to be disturbed for Harper's Yahoos. Human, were they? Perhaps. But who cared? As for Morality, Harper didn't even bother to mention the word. It would have meant as little as Chivalry.

Meanwhile, he was learning something of the Yahoos' language. Slowly and arduously, he gained their confidence. They would shyly take food from him. He persuaded the C-G to knock down a wall and

enlarge their quarters. The official was a kindly old man, and he seemed to grow fond of the stooped, shaggy, splay-footed Primitives. And after a while he decided that they were smarter than animals.

"Put some clothes on 'em, Harper," he directed. "If they're people, let 'em start acting like people. They're too big to go around naked."

So, eventually, washed and dressed, Junior and Senior were introduced to Civilization via 3-D, and the program was taped and shown everywhere.

Would you like a cigarette, Junior? Here, let me light it for you. Give Junior a glass of water, Senior. Let's see you take off your slippers, fellows, and put them on again. And now do what I say in your own language . . .

But if Harper thought that might change public opinion, he thought wrong. Seals perform, too, don't they? And so do monkeys. They talk? Parrots talk better. And anyway, who cared to be bothered about animals or Primitives? They were okay for fun, but that was all.

And the reports from Barnumland showed fewer and fewer Yahoos each time.

Then one night two drunken crewmen climbed over the fence and went carousing in the C-G's zoo. Before they left, they broke the vapor-light tubes, and in the morning Junior and Senior were found dead from the poisonous fumes.

That was Sunday morning. By

Sunday afternoon Harper was drunk, and getting drunker. The men who knocked on his door got no answer. They went in anyway. He was slouched, red-eyed, over the table.

"People," he muttered. "Tell you they were *human!*" he shouted.

"Yes, Mr. Harper, we know that," said a young man, pale, with close-cropped dark hair.

Harper peered at him, boozily. "Know you," he said. "Thir' gen'ration Coulterboy. Go 'way. Spoil your c'reer. Whaffor. Smelly ol' Yahoo?" The young medico nodded to his companion, who took a small flask from his pocket, opened it. They held it under Harper's nose by main force. He gasped and struggled, but they held on, and in a few minutes he was sober.

"That's rough stuff," he said, coughing and shaking his head. "But—thanks, Dr. Hill. Your ship in? Or are you stopping over?"

The former intern shrugged. "I've left the ships," he said. "I don't have to worry about spoiling my new career. This is my superior, Dr. Anscomb."

Anscomb was also young, and, like most men from Coulter's System, pale. He said, "I understand you can speak the Yahoos' language."

Harper winced. "What good's that now? They're dead, poor little bastards."

Anscomb nodded. "I'm sorry about that, believe me. Those fumes

are so quick . . . But there are still a few alive on Barnum's Planet who can be saved. The Joint Board for Research is interested. Are you?"

It had taken Harper fifteen years to work up to a room of this size and quality in Bachelor Executives' Quarters. He looked around it. He picked up the letter which had come yesterday. ". . . neglected your work and become a joke . . . unless you accept a transfer and reduction in grade . . ." He nodded slowly, putting down the letter. "I guess I've already made my choice. What are your plans. . . ?"

Harper, Hill, and Anscomb sat on a hummock on the north coast of Barnumland, just out of rock-throwing range of the gaunt escarpment of the cliff which rose before them. Behind them a tall fence had been erected. The only Yahoos still alive were "nesting" in the caves of the cliff. Harper spoke into the amplifier again. His voice was hoarse as he forced it into the clicks and moans of the Primitives' tongue.

Hill stirred restlessly. "Are you sure that means, '*Here is food. Here is water*'—and not, '*Come down and let us eat you*'? I think I can almost say it myself by now."

Shifting and stretching, Anscomb said, "It's been two days. Unless they've determined to commit race suicide a bit more abruptly than your ancient Tasmanians—"

He stopped as Harper's fingers closed tightly on his arm.

There was a movement on the cliff. A shadow. A pebble clattered. Then a wrinkled face peered fearfully over a ledge. Slowly, and with many stops and hesitations, a figure came down the face of the cliff. It was an old she. Her withered and pendulous dugs flapped against her sagging belly as she made the final jump to the ground, and—her back to the wall of rock—faced them.

"Here is food," Harper repeated softly. "Here is water." The old woman sighed. She plodded wearily across the ground, paused, shaking with fear, and then flung herself down at the food and the water.

"The Joint Board for Research has just won the first round," Hill said. Anscomb nodded. He jerked his thumb upward. Hill looked.

Another head appeared at the cliff. Then another. And another. They watched. The crone got up, water dripping from her dewlaps. She turned to the cliff. "Come down," she cried. "Here is food and water. Do not die. Come down and eat and drink." Slowly, her tribespeople did so. There were thirty of them.

Harper asked, "Where are the others?"

The crone held out her dried and leathery breasts to him. "Where are those who have sucked? Where are those your brothers took away?" She uttered a single shrill wail; then was silent.

But she wept—and Harper wept with her.

"I'll guess we'll swing it all right," Hill said. Anscomb nodded. "Pity there's so few of them. I was afraid we'd have to use gas to get at them. Might have lost several that way."

Neither of them wept.

For the first time since ships had come to their world, Yahoos *walked* aboard one. They came hesitantly and fearfully, but Harper had told them that they were going to a new home and they believed him. He told them that they were going to a place of much food and water, where no one would hunt them down. He continued to talk until the ship was on its way, and the last Primitive had fallen asleep under the dimmed-out vapor-tube lights. Then he staggered to his cabin and fell asleep himself. He slept for thirty hours.

He had something to eat when he awoke, then strolled down to the hold where the Primitives were. He grimaced, remembered his trip to the hold of the other ship to collect Senior, and the frenzied howling of the convicts awaiting the females. At the entrance to the hold he met Dr. Hill, greeted him.

"I'm afraid some of the Yahoos are sick," Hill said. "But Dr. Anscomb is treating them. The others have been moved to this compartment here."

Harper stared. "Sick? How can

they be sick? What from? And how many?"

Dr. Hill said, "It appears to be Virulent Plague . . . Fifteen of them are down with it. You've *had* all six shots, haven't you? Good. Nothing to worry—"

Harper felt the cold steal over him. He stared at the pale young physician. "No one can enter or leave any system or planet without having had all six shots for Virulent Plague," he said, slowly. "So if we are all immune, how could the Primitives have gotten it? And how is it that only fifteen have it? Exactly half of them. What about the other fifteen, Dr. Hill? *Are they the control group for your experiment?*"

Dr. Hill looked at him calmly. "As a matter of fact, yes. I hope you'll be reasonable. Those were the only terms the Joint Board for Research would agree to. After all, not even convicts will volunteer for experiments in Virulent Plague."

Harper nodded. He felt frozen. After a moment he asked, "Can Anscomb do anything to pull them through?"

Dr. Hill raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps. We've got something we wanted to try. And at any rate, the reports should provide additional data on the subject. We must take the long-range view."

Harper nodded. "I suppose you're right," he said.

By noon all fifteen were dead.

"Well, that means an uneven

control group," Dr. Anscomb complained. "Seven against eight. Still, that's not *too* bad. And it can't be helped. We'll start tomorrow."

"Virulent Plague again?" Harper asked.

Anscomb and Hill shook their heads. "Dehydration," the latter said. "And after that, there's a new treatment for burns we're anxious to try . . . It's a shame, when you think of the Yahoos being killed off by the thousands, year after year, *uselessly*. Like the dodo. We came along just in time—thanks to you, Harper."

He gazed at them. "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*" he asked. They looked at him, politely blank. "I'd forgotten. Doctors don't study Latin anymore, do they? An old proverb. It means: 'Who shall guard the guards themselves?'. . . Will you excuse me, Doctors?"

Harper let himself into the compartment. "I come," he greeted the fifteen.

"We see you," they responded. The old woman asked how their brothers and sisters were "in the other cave."

"They are well . . . Have you eaten, have you drunk? Yes? Then let us sleep," Harper said.

The old woman seemed doubtful. "Is it time? The light still shines." She pointed to it. Harper looked at her. She had been so afraid. But she had trusted him. Suddenly he bent over and kissed her. She gaped.

"Now the light goes out," Harper said. He slipped off a shoe and shattered the vapor tube. He groped in the dark for the air-switch, turned it off. Then he sat down. He had brought them here, and if

they had to die, it was only fitting that he should share their fate. There no longer seemed any place for the helpless, or for those who cared about them.

"Now let us sleep," he said.

In the next issue of Venture S F . . .

It is often difficult to offer a specific rundown on the next issue of a bimonthly; we can say, however, that the following stories—and others—will probably show up next time around:

"All the Colors of the Rainbow," by Leigh Brackett . . . a tight, suspenseful story of unreasoning violence.

"I'm in Marsport Without Hilda," by Isaac Asimov . . . concerning the tragic, if funny, happenings during a brief leave period.

"Featherbed on Chlyntha," by Miriam Allen deFord . . . about a young man on an unknown planet whose inhabitants needed extraordinary help.

"Sit Close to Me, Sam," by Walter M. Miller, Jr. . . . a compelling tale that is not easy to describe, but definitely should be read.

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Venturings



• The tough little fellow to the left will probably not answer if you holler "Venchy!" at him—even though that's his name. Too busy buzzing about looking for important excitements of one kind and another. Ed Emsh, up all night working on a *Venture* cover, caught an uncertain glimpse of him one dawn, which is how we happen to have this shot. Venchy's existence was first suspected by Walter M. Miller, Jr.; ungratefully enough, the first assignment we gave Venchy was to drop in at the Miller home and do a little prodding with that blaster. Result: "Sit Close to Me, Sam," a powerful novelet planned for our next issue.

• When Venchy returned from that mission, he was singing something about "A rope from hell to hang her," in a scratchy alto, and had a dangerous, preoccupied look about him—so, before he got into local, useless trouble, we thanked him for the title idea and dispatched him in search of Paul French. Now Mr. French, as announced in our first issue, was to have collaborated with Isaac Asimov on a *Venture* story—and he'd been hanging back, claiming disgruntledly that Professor Asimov kept trying to get a sexy girl in the story. Those of you who know the good professor will recognize that this charge is faintly ridiculous . . . and may, on the other hand, be grunted to know that it is nonetheless true. In any case, Venchy offered Mr. French equal space later on if he would get out of this story, and brightly promised to slip a Martian frog in his bed if he didn't. Result: "I'm in Marsport Without Hilda," by Isaac Asimov, will appear in our next issue. . . .

• Last year, Avram Davidson won the \$1500 First Prize in the *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* Short Story Contest. He won it for a Pre-Civil War story titled "The Necessity of His Condition," and those of you who have read the Davidson stories in *EQMM* and *Venture's* other sister magazine, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, know that he has one of the most varied and compelling story-telling talents around. . . . Even Venchy furtively knuckled an eye after reading "Now Let Us Sleep" (page 119). Of course, that *could* have been cigar smoke. . . .

—RPM

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